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MARRIAGE BUREAU



MARY OLIVER & MARY BENEDETTA

MARRIAGE
BUREAU



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INTRODUCTION

“MARRIAGE BUREAU! WHAT AN EXTRAORDINARY THING! What do they *do*, anyway. I wonder what it’s like!”

That was my train of thoughts when I first heard about the Marriage Bureau. And as everyone seems to have the same reaction it is one reason why Mary Oliver and I have written this book.

We met in a Television programme—or rather just before it when I was sent to prepare her script.

I remember trying to picture Mary when I was on my way to see her before the programme, and failing to imagine her at all. How I was surprised and delighted to find a simple, quiet, rather demure young girl, with an intelligent, pretty face and gravely sympathetic dark-brown eyes. Somebody very sincere, with a great sense of responsibility over her strange task of trying to find their soul-mate for thousands of lonely people, and a refreshing sense of fun over all the curious foibles of human nature she meets on the way.

And I like my memory of my first visit to the office in Bond Street, where I saw the lively, industrious partnership of Mary Oliver and Heather Jenner at work.

Since then I have seen Mary a great deal. And in quick, vivid little flashes, mixed up in general conversation and natural feminine comments on somebody’s hat or yesterday’s cinema, she has unfolded the story of the Marriage Bureau.

That is how the book came into being—with her telling the story and my writing it. And why, although by two authors, it had to be written in the first person.

Mary thought it would bore people to hear about her other jobs, but since she says they all helped her to understand human beings, and so were useful to her with the Marriage Bureau, perhaps they might be mentioned.

The first one was when her family told her she would never be able to earn her own living, and she replied by getting a job in a paper factory—"Picking papers and sorting them into three different heaps. I earned £1 a week and lived on it in factory girls' lodgings").

Into a very short space of time she also crammed being a dentist's receptionist—"I left after the first day because I found I had to stand by during an extraction and pick up teeth off the floor"). Testing films in a dark room—"I stuck that for longer, but I couldn't live in a dark room indefinitely"). Delivering cakes for a cake shop—"I'm afraid they caught me eating the nicest cakes on the way").

Teaching at a riding school—"But it included cleaning the stables"). Being lady's maid to a woman who advertised she would be going to Japan—"That was why I took the job and only asked for 12s. 6d. a week. But she made me sew on old-fashioned dress preservers, and I thought they were padding and put them in the shoulders of all her dresses, which made her very angry. Afterwards I used to ring up the hotel to find if she had gone to Japan yet, but months later she still hadn't departed, so I don't believe she ever meant to go").

Acting as games mistress at a school—"I couldn't play games at all, but I used to stand leaning against a post, shouting 'Good shot!' Then I had to take all the small children down to the sea to bathe. Most of them couldn't swim and I had a terrible time trying to count all the bobbing heads. Unfortunately I had to stay a whole term because I was only paid at the end of each term").

Mary learned to drive a car—"My family refused to let me learn on their car, so I went as chauffeuse to a neurotic old woman, who I discovered wanted me to drive her to Shoreditch every day where she got some dope. Fortunately

she didn't seem to notice that I was having my first self-taught driving lesson when I took her down Oxford Street on the way").

But I think the most enterprising thing she did up till the Marriage Bureau was answering an advertisement to go as skipper on a private yacht belonging to an elderly woman. And in spite of knowing nothing at all about sailing when she went, she managed to hold down the job for the season.

"That was fun; I enjoyed it a lot. She was a 45-foot sloop rigged sailing yacht, and the woman who owned her was sixty and very nice. I was the only girl who answered the advertisement, so she took me instead of one of the men, and we started from the East Coast. The old lady went to bed early, and when she was out of the way I used to go off and talk to the skippers in the pubs by the harbour, and get all sorts of tips from them."

And so to her real *métier*, the Marriage Bureau.

Here she is to take the stage, looking as I like her best. A small figure in a long coat made of scarlet hunting cloth with a black velvet collar, hatless, with dark hair, a fair skin and pretty colouring. She is looking at you with those serious brown eyes, or laughing infectiously at something ridiculous. And while she talks I hope you will enjoy her company—Mary Oliver, to tell the story of the Marriage Bureau.

Chapter I

An unfortunate experiment—How Mary Oliver thought of the Marriage Bureau and why she started it—Journey to India with a one-way ticket—What happened in India—Plans to start the Marriage Bureau—Looking for an office

SOMEBODY HAD LEFT THE GATE OPEN. I NOTICED IT BECAUSE it was one of those single iron gates that had dropped on its hinges and you could never shut it casually. You had to coax it over hummocks in the gravel path and I remembered doing this when I went out.

I wondered vaguely who had come to call. Probably it was one of my mother's usual country visitors, and beyond a fleeting hope that they were on the point of leaving I didn't give it another thought.

To-day I was feeling particularly happy and carefree. I had been for a walk in the rain, rejoicing secretly, while my feet seemed to float over the clogging mud paths and I wanted to sing stupid songs to the two spaniels who were flurrying in and out of the dripping hedges. Nobody knew what those last three weeks were like, or what a release I was celebrating.

What did it matter if it was a gloomy day. I looked across the lawn at the square-towered village church, and its wet grey walls scantily filled with moss. At the mulberry tree in the middle of the lawn standing like an old man in a heavy damp cloak, and the dark group of yew trees at the end of the path. And I took hold of a branch of rhododendrons and shook it light-heartedly as I went past, so that the over-loaded raindrops showered on my mackintosh. Nothing could possibly be sombre for me that afternoon.

The short garden path belonged to the simple farmhouse that stood there five hundred years ago. Since then a succession of owners with whims for 'building on' had elaborated it into a large rambling old house with a jumble of architecture that was happily very picturesque.

Still in my gayest mood on this summer afternoon, I reached the front door of my home in Cambridgeshire. On the way I glanced at the big glass witch bowl that stood outside, and saw the dogs in its reflection, still racing each other on the lawn behind. I called them and they came tumbling into the wide stone hall, with burrs and fronds of new young fern clinging rakishly to their shaggy coats.

Inside the hall I heard something that made me stop quite still, while I suddenly realized the awfulness of what had happened. My gay mood vanished before the mockery of the disaster I had done so much to avert, and I wondered how on earth I could muster enough courage to go into that room.

I dragged off my Wellington boots and stood them in a corner on the stone floor away from the rug. I was staring at the familiar copper box with its half-open lid supported on the overflowing pile of logs inside, and listening to the slow tick of the grandfather clock. It seemed hours instead of seconds before the voices spoke again and made me more certain of what I dreaded to believe.

For the past three weeks I had sat in that hall, staring at the log box and listening for footsteps outside the front entrance. Whenever they came I darted towards the door, and, as the maid appeared from the back of the hall, I had to look as if I had only opened it because I happened to be going out at that particular moment. Each time I had somehow manœuvred my visitor outside again, and decoyed him out of earshot and always towards the gate.

There was the same vigil on the telephone. For three weeks I had never dared to bath properly, but made a cautious splashing in the bath, while I kept my dressing-gown near to hand, ready for the headlong rush to reach the

telephone before anyone else. Sometimes I was beaten—usually by my schoolboy brother who so inconveniently was home for the holidays.

Mealtimes were an ordeal of anxiety. Often just as I was lulled into a false sense of security, enjoying my soup and thinking the whole thing was safely over, my mother would say: "Mr. — rang you up." She always said it without comment, but in a way that made me feel she wanted him explained. Or my father would suddenly come out of a reverie about the cows and horses to give me a message from yet another caller on the telephone that they had never heard of before. I used to think how scandalized they would have been had I told them I had never heard of them either.

How could I ever tell them I had put an advertisement in a matrimonial weekly?

I did it because I was planning to start a Marriage Bureau, and before I started it I wanted to find out how the matrimonial papers worked, so that I could follow my own lines with the bureau and be sure I wasn't copying anything that already existed.

The best way of finding this out seemed to become a client, so I paid £5 and advertised for a husband. But in my zeal over the experiment I never gave a thought to the consequences. And these took the awkward shape of a continuous flow of would-be husbands who made surprise attacks on my home. Bus drivers, commercial travellers, city clerks, sanitary inspectors and railwaymen either rang up or arrived unheralded on the doorstep in alarmingly quick succession.

I had not told my family about the advertisement, because I knew they would be horrified. Besides I dare not mention the Marriage Bureau in case they disapproved and tried to frustrate my precious plan.

So for those nightmare weeks I had been afraid to leave the house in case I was not there when any of my 'suits' arrived. And there were still the awkward times when I failed to forestall my family and had to find some natural

explanation for the strange voices—and accents—that asked for me on the telephone.

After three weeks there was a heaven-sent lull for two whole days, so I decided the attack was over and I could safely venture out.

What an untimely confidence had led me out on that walk. I tried to summon my courage by persuading myself that this might be a perfectly ordinary caller after all and, seizing the handle of the door, I walked in bravely.

My mother was sitting in a large arm-chair by the fireplace, looking dignified but slightly bewildered. Opposite her was a nondescript little man in a black suit, with a face the colour of old paper. I remember thinking he looked like an undertaker. He was sitting so much on the edge of the low easy-chair that his knees were almost on the floor, and he was clinging with both hands to a thick gold watch-chain that hung across his waistcoat.

It seemed an eternity while I waited in the doorway and said nothing. Even the dogs seemed to sense the awkward situation. They just stood disconsolately one each side of me, still panting, their wet coats beginning to steam in the warmth of the room, and made no attempt to investigate the visitor.

"Here is my daughter," said my mother. "This is Mr. Wheeler, Mary."

Again the tone of voice that expected an explanation.

"Oh," I said quickly. "How do you do? Did you have a good journey?"

I tried my best to sound as though I had asked him down for the day.

"Pleased to meet you. Yes, thank you, miss; I came down by the Green Line."

The little man swivelled round and tried to stand, but his legs were so crumpled up under his knees he only got into a crouching attitude. I could imagine him in the same attitude on a bowling green.

"Was it crowded?"

I asked the question while I was playing for time, wondering what had passed between them before I came in.

"Not so bad."

This was awful, because now I must say something else. I had hoped he would ramble on while I tried to assess the amount of damage that had already been done.

I could only think of things to say that would hardly fit when I was supposed to know he was coming down. Obviously he had cut out the advertisement and kept it in his pocket till he had a free day. How many more had done the same thing? There might be fifty parchment-faced men still running round with the cutting in their pockets and I mightn't be safe for months.

"Come and see the garden," I invited suddenly, forgetting that it was pouring with rain.

Once I got him outside I could tell him I was 'suited,' which was how I put off all the others, but I couldn't do it in front of my mother.

On the way to the front door I gave him an airy description of my walk to cover our retreat. I was terrified he would start talking about the advertisement before we were out of earshot—if he hadn't already given me away before I came in.

Outside I shut the front door carefully and began leading him towards the gate. But parchment-face had seen the church and stood gazing at it from the porch.

"Ah," he said pontifically, "to have the church so near your home."

I supposed he was thinking of our wedding, and tried to change the subject.

"That mulberry tree is very old," I announced bleakly, for want of something better to say.

Then I saw him scanning the ancient tombstones in the small graveyard.

"To think," he said, "all their relatives died long ago, and there's nobody to put flowers on their graves."

So he *was* an undertaker.

"Now that's unnecessary," he continued. "If they was to have everlasting flowers those graves would never look forgotten. Immortal flowers for people who've gone to the immortal life."

"You're interested in graves?" I thought afterwards it sounded rather as if we were talking about bee-keeping.

"I live off them."

Then it crossed my mind he might be a grave-digger.

"I've plenty put by for when I can't carry on. Twelve-roomed house—holidays abroad—a tidy bit of life insurance when I die."

He removed a hand from his watch-chain to wave it expansively.

"All done by flowers," he finished, frowning at the neglected tombstones.

"Flowers?" I murmured vaguely.

"Wax flowers—put under glass so no dust can't get at 'em, and an R.I.P. message inside with the flowers."

So that was it. Parchment-face had made a small fortune in artificial wreaths in glass cases and wanted a wife to share it with him.

If I had not been so anxious over his conversation with my mother in the drawing-room I might have burst out laughing. Besides, I still had to tell him I was suited.

When he had gone I purposely went back to the drawing-room to write a letter. If there was going to be an inquest over him it had better happen now rather than at the dinner-table with all the family present. But I wasn't going to lead into it myself.

My mother was just leaving the room when I came in.

"I do wish," she said casually, "that you wouldn't let travelling salesmen get hold of your name and come all the way down here."

So now I remember the little wreath-maker very gratefully. Whether by accident or not he had kept my secret gallantly.

Of course, it was all partly my own fault, as in my advertisement I had only stated that I wanted a husband who was not fat. But then, even had I given more particulars, I could not have been certain the right people would come along. The matrimonial paper was purely a medium for people who wished to advertise for a husband or wife, and as such was very efficient.

How much better it would be if there were an organization that could arrange the actual match-making and see that suitable people met each other. And this was my idea for the Marriage Bureau. I would make each prospective bride and bridegroom fill in a detailed form, both about themselves and about the kind of person they wanted to marry. These would be filed. Whenever it was possible, I would try to see clients in person, so that from my own observation I could add details to their cards which would be of value in helping us to choose the right kind of person for them to meet.

In this way I hoped to pair people off who shared the same tastes, religion, social status and income; and whose marriage, therefore, would start with a firm basis of equality and common interest.

I decided to start in London because it was most central and would be convenient for people coming home on leave from abroad. I wanted the Bureau to cover all walks of life.

After all, London was rather like a marriage market anyway, with parents spending fortunes to display their daughters impressively before supposedly eligible young men. Surely the whole thing might be done more satisfactorily, and infinitely more cheaply, through a Marriage Bureau.

In the ordinary way nobody knows all the practical details about their prospective husband or wife before they meet them. The most important step in life is usually left to chance. Young men wander aimlessly through life, hoping that by some happy coincidence they will meet the girl of their dreams. And girls sit waiting for 'Mr. Right' (that nostalgic person invented by our parents) who probably

does not come along anyway. Then there is human nature's awkward trick of falling in love first and considering whether the match is suitable afterwards. Luck plays too large a part, I felt, in this serious business of marriage.

It was with all these thoughts that I decided on this strange career of finding other people's happiness. Later on I persuaded Heather Jenner, my partner, to share all the hard work and responsibilities that it involved.

The idea first came to me when I was coming home from India, where I had stayed with an uncle on holiday. There, as so often happens, I had got engaged to a most eligible man in the district. He was older than I was, and I soon discovered that he had set ideas about the uses and purposes of a wife, and I was to be moulded along these lines. Instead of our laughing and having fun together and sharing interests, he spent most of our time together lecturing me on how I was to behave when we were married. Finally, on the eve of a dreaded and expensive wedding, I broke off the engagement. With my unspent trousseau money I bought a ticket home.

On the voyage I thought of all the eligible young men in places like India who wanted to get married and who hurriedly proposed to the first presentable girl they met who might be utterly unsuitable, and I thought of all the attractive girls in England waiting for husbands. All this ill-adjustment seemed such a waste. It was a pity there could not be some medium for bringing the right people together.

When I reached home I had exactly £15. And, as £5 went on the advertisement in the matrimonial paper, I only had a capital of £10 on which to start the Bureau.

The first thing I did was to go to Scotland Yard and find out whether I would be breaking the law in any way. But the Scotland Yard officials could find no objection when

I told them how I wanted to run it, nor any record of another Marriage Bureau, so I felt free to start.

I had planned the office routine in my cabin on the voyage home, and all I had to do now was to look for an office.

‘Comfortable office facilities, 12/6 per week.’

My eyes were fixed on a small-print announcement in the advertising column of the morning newspaper. I went on staring at it till my breakfast coffee was stone cold. It sounded just what I wanted, and the rent was far more commensurate with my £10 capital than anything else I had come across. I decided to begin my office hunt straight away and go up to London that morning.

The address was in a big West End thoroughfare, near Piccadilly Circus. What in the world could be more central and convenient? I almost sang when I arrived at the entrance to the imposing modern block of offices.

“Will you please show me the empty office on the fourth floor.”

The uniformed lift attendant looked at me in surprise.

My heart sank as for a moment I fancied somebody else must have snapped it up already. Then he saw the newspaper cutting I was still holding in my hand after looking for the address. He nodded and beckoned me into the lift.

I thought at first I must have come through the wrong door. It was a large room, full of odd-looking men sitting at their desks in bowler hats which they had not bothered to take off. One was lying back in his chair, with his feet on his desk and his hat at the back of his head, talking loudly down his telephone. Most of them were making notes or ringing people up, while a few just sat and stared gloomily at the others. There were several hangers-on who lolled round in overcoats with bulging pockets, and the room

seemed to be littered with all kinds of samples from stockings to toothpaste.

It took me several seconds to realize they were all carrying on different businesses. They seemed to be mainly bookies and people who send round free samples. There was one empty desk which some of the hangers-on were using as a seat.

Then it dawned on me that the 'comfortable office facilities' meant a place among this extraordinary assembly, without any privacy at all. I pictured my Marriage Bureau clients coming to discuss their private lives, and being leered at by the brotherhood of bowler hats. And without a word I made my escape.

When I got outside the door I found I was holding a free sample of face powder, but I was so astonished over the whole thing I never noticed it being put into my hand.

I met Heather Jenner in Ceylon and she was on the boat coming home with me. Whenever I asked her to be my partner in the Marriage Bureau (which I did several times when we got home), she still thought it was all a joke, and that it would never come off anyway. Now when I was looking for an office she joined in and helped me search—though not yet believing I was serious.

In choosing an office for our purpose we had to think of various items of importance. We could not have one where there would be a tittering lift-boy who might giggle cheekily when he was showing up some of the clients. And we could not have a commissionaire standing outside the building because people might be shy of going in when he was there. Also we had to be somewhere where we were allowed to have a signboard outside.

We went to quite a number of house-agents, but directly we told them we wanted the office to start a Marriage Bureau they said they had nothing on their books. I do not know what they thought the Marriage Bureau was going to be, but we might just as well have announced that we wanted to start a gambling hell.

Then I remembered something which, for no particular reason, gave me a little more hope. A year ago, before I went to India, I had been to look at an office in a Bond Street attic. Not that I had any idea then of starting the Bureau. It was like a new form of window-shopping that I used to indulge in when I was bored—looking at offices in case I could ever have an office of my own. I had not the vaguest notion what I would do in it.

Now I wondered suddenly whether the Bond Street attic was still to let, and, stopping to find Heather, I went along to see. When we found the board still up I felt it must be my destiny, and after fetching the key from the hairdresser on the ground floor, we ran up the stairs and unlocked the shaky little door.

There were the two desks, the exciting swivel chairs (I didn't know they were out of order), the telephone, and the brown linoleum with its familiar dark ink-stains. We stood there thinking it over, and the more we thought the more decided we became.

After all, we could not be very ambitious with a capital of only £10. The rent was 25s. for one room and a lavatory perched up in an attic that had been empty for several years. This included lighting, heating and furniture.

Perhaps it was my delight over finding the office that at last infected Heather with enthusiasm for the Marriage Bureau. Anyway, directly she saw I was quite serious about it she agreed to set out with me on our strange career.

Chapter II

The first client—How the Bureau works—Trying to find the first client a bride—A man of position makes a happy marriage—The first client gets married—Glamourizing a church mouse

“WHO DO YOU KNOW SOCIALLY?”

“Nobody.”

“Oh, but I saw your picture in the *Bystander*.”

He was tall, dark and very good-looking. His suit was well cut and the figure in the suit moved with assurance. For a moment I thought our first client at the Marriage Bureau was going to be everything a girl could wish. I might even have liked his voice, but I was so disconcerted by his way of opening the conversation that I hardly noticed it.

I had expected the first interview with the first client to be very difficult—especially as we would have nobody else on the books. Of course, I was prepared for frankness—or shyness. And I had rehearsed many imaginary conversations to prepare myself for almost anything, but I had never conceived the one that took place.

My reply was involuntary. I did not really see why I should parade my few titled friends to impress the young man from Calcutta. But I pulled myself together enough to say we had some girls of very good family waiting for husbands.

Actually we had no wives to offer him at all. I tried to describe them as vaguely as I could, while my partner, Heather Jenner, kicked the telephone bell underneath her desk (we discovered we could make it ring that way) and

answered fictitious calls from dazzling young women.

His manner to us was as though he were buying cheese that he had already failed to get at a more expensive shop. I felt acutely conscious of my overall and the paint in my hair, while he stared curiously at the pots of paint we had not even had time to push into the corner. It was our very first day in the office, and we were painting it ourselves—primrose, because we thought it was spring-like and romantic. We never expected anyone would come near us for days.

Sometimes he stared at Heather, who is very striking with her fair good looks and tall smart carriage, but I am afraid he was assessing the number of times she might or might not have appeared in the *Tatler*.

As soon as I could I handed him a form to fill in and got him off the dangerous subject of brides who didn't exist. In it he had to state his requirements as to his wife's height, religion, figure, income and so on, and various details about himself including whether he had been married before and whether he had any encumbrances.

These forms sometimes arrive with rather curious entries, especially when they are sent in by post. Amongst other things clients have to fill in particulars about their hobbies and interests. One woman filled hers in as 'Sex.'

Some of the men give a touchingly full picture of the wife they have been dreaming about and could never find. Like a young officer with a four-figure income and glamorous hobbies like polo and big-game hunting, who said he wanted somebody slim, with essentially good breeding and charming manners, with good legs, lovely hands, a good complexion and a nice voice. The same day we received a form from an industrial chemist who only wanted somebody with 'good teeth and a straight nose.'

Calcutta filled in his form with alacrity. At any rate he was dead serious about it. And while he flourished his pen he told me that he was in jute, his income was about £800 a year, and he wanted to 'marry into Society' and take his

glittering society wife back to India with him. He kept on referring to 'one's friends in Calcutta' who would be so hurt if he did not make a 'good' marriage. His main ambition in life seemed to be that he wanted *his* photograph to appear in the *Tatler*, *Sketch* or *Bystander*, and marrying a title seemed to be the obvious way to arrive at that gratifying achievement.

When he left I felt rather sick, and very dispirited about our prospects of ever finding him a suitable wife. But he had paid his registration fee of £5 5s. and we had put him on the books, so we just had to go on giving him introductions till he found his soul-mate, because that was the arrangement. When a marriage took place, if it ever did, he would have to pay us £21.

We felt almost dishonest at taking £5 5s. when our capital was only £10. But we were soon to find it was very hard-earned.

That day several girls came in from varied walks of life, most of them very nervous but only at first. They soon got over it when they were telling us about their ideal husbands. Their registration fee was £5 5s., and if they were reasonably attractive we put them on the books and took their money. Otherwise we told them that we could not accept their names until we had any people who might suit them.

We once had somebody so shapeless and so unbelievably plain that no power on earth could have found her a mate, and she kept on repeating that all her relations were dead while we wondered whether they were all like her. The awful part was she kept coming back for months, and we could only be very sympathetic and polite to her, though we were always terrified she would bang into one of our best clients on the staircase.

Among our first day's would-be brides we had a girl who had an interesting family tree and worked in a beauty salon (not the one beneath our office). So to show Calcutta how prompt we were, we introduced them.

I deposited her at the Ritz at half-past twelve, feeling

very proud of her because she certainly matched him in looks, and then left them alone together to have lunch.

Heather and I were so excited over what we believed was going to be our first match that we could hardly contain ourselves through the afternoon till we had news of how the meeting went off. What we had entirely forgotten was that the girl with the aristocratic family had to work all day for her living, and had no time for promiscuous publicity on the race-meeting page of the *Tatler*. If we had been on the spot we might have asked her if she had a photograph of herself in the dress she was presented in, and kept him quiet with that.

We did not have long to wait for news. He came in next day, and while he announced condescendingly that she was certainly well born, he took exception to her having worked in the beauty parlour. "One's friends in Calcutta, you know, wouldn't have liked it. Of course, if she had *owned* the beauty parlour, and it had been in Bond Street, it might have been different."

The girl's report was equally discouraging. She rang up and said he was frightful. Nobody, in fact, took a very good view of him, and the rapturous faces I had hoped to see never came along.

Then one day he asked me out to dine with him, so, as I like to know as much about my clients as possible, I accepted willingly. To my dismay he was even more pompous in the restaurant than he was in the office. By the time we got to the second course every waiter in sight had been called 'Boy' and told how the standard of English cooking had gone down since he was last home on leave. "Why the jolly old Taj was better than this." It was so painful I tried to talk him out of it. But I do not think it had much effect.

When we started the Marriage Bureau we had no typewriter, so we had to answer all our correspondence by hand.

By the end of the first week it had grown so overwhelming we had to have a secretary, and after another week its proportions grew so enormous we were obliged to install a second secretary.

By the time we had been going for a month we were getting an average of 300 letters a day, and the Marriage Bureau was well launched. So with renewed confidence we moved into a large first-floor office with an outer office and a waiting-room. We tried to make our new office a much more attractive setting for the opening chapter of anyone's romance, and I think we succeeded. It had silver walls, mauve chiffon curtains, a soft carpet and vases of lilies. Except for our desks it looked more like a drawing-room.

The waiting-room, and the fact that our own office where we interviewed people had a separate exit, were things that added greatly to our peace of mind.

There was a day soon after we started in the old office, when a very distinguished and extremely nice man arrived as a prospective client. I had just shown him in, and was outside the door getting something out of a filing cabinet we had to keep on the landing, when I saw a large fat negress and her daughter coming up the stairs.

We simply could not show her into the office and let our client think she was one of our selection of brides. And we could not leave her hanging about the stairs, because he would be certain to bump into her when he came out. Nor could I ask her to come back later, because how could I tell whether she would not arrive back too soon and still collide with him.

After rapid thinking I greeted her very politely, and then suddenly pushed the two of them into the lavatory and locked the door. They were so astonished that even the child never murmured.

Having disposed of the negresses, I went back to interview the client with more or less my normal composure.

He was a good-looking man with a very nice expression

and equally nice manners. Recently he had retired from one of the Services, and held a responsible job for the Government somewhere out of London.

Meanwhile he was spending a pleasant, quiet life in the country, with £1,000 a year and plenty of fishing and shooting, but he wanted an attractive, well-bred wife to share it with and to be a good hostess in his home.

He had written us sensible, intelligent and quite amusing letters about the people we had suggested he should meet. Meanwhile he had been corresponding with them and looking at their photographs. Now he had chosen the girl he wanted to meet, for they had already taken a liking to each other in their letters. And he had come to see us and have a talk before he took her out.

From those letters he wrote to us we had really got to know him quite well. He had been stationed in India most of his life, in places where he met very few people. On his leaves, although he went about a great deal, he had never happened to meet the type of person he had set his heart on for a wife.

Now that he was settled in England, retired from the army and working in a job which did not keep him fully occupied, he was feeling lonely and he wanted to get married.

"I don't wish to get married just for the sake of being married," he told us, "I would rather remain single than make a regrettable mistake, for I've no use for a loveless marriage."

He also said: "Frankly I'm not keen to marry someone who's too well off. I've been more or less hard-up all my life and I'm now used to it, and it wouldn't be fair for me to marry someone whose tastes I couldn't live up to."

This was when he eschewed meeting a beautiful peeress with a good deal of money, who did not mind whether her husband had money or not as long as he was a type to be proud of. We were glad when he wrote this because we are always on our guard against fortune hunters.

When he was talking to us we felt like connoisseurs in some exquisite work of art, for which we were helping him to search the world. That was exactly how he treated us. We knew that a man who regarded his wife as something so rare and precious would always be good to her, and he deserved somebody specially adorable and worth such treasured keeping.

That we found her for him—just such an exquisite creature—was one of the happenings that made the whole thing seem worth while. For the girl he had chosen to meet that day was all he had hoped for, and they were married not long afterwards. They still write to us telling us how ideally happy they are.

And all the time they had met before in India and liked each other then. He spoke to her for five minutes at a party and had been kicking himself ever since for not having tried to follow her up.

When this man had gone I saw he had been with us in the office nearly two hours, but I was so engrossed I had never noticed the time. Suddenly I came back to earth and remembered the negresses who were still locked in the lavatory.

Quite expecting to be murdered directly I opened the door, I went and unlocked it with trembling hands—only to find them sitting there as serenely as if they were merely waiting for a train in a station waiting-room.

This time *I* was taken aback—so much so that I forgot to apologize or even explain their extraordinary reception to the Marriage Bureau. I could not have explained it anyway, as I could hardly say: "I thought you'd be happier there." Anything I said would have sounded extremely odd.

Instead I brought them into the office and made the mother fill in a form, but evaded putting her on the books, almost praying in the meantime that another client would not arrive while she was there.

We had another unfortunate episode when we had a

letter from a man in Liverpool who seemed a very desirable husband, so we put him in touch with a girl who lived near Liverpool as we thought they could go out together. A few days later we had a letter from her saying that he was quite black.

It is not that we have anything against anyone coloured, but our task is quite complicated enough matching up white people without taking on any other colours. So we stick to one race.

Meanwhile Calcutta was nearing the end of his leave and was getting impatient, for he still had not found a wife.

We were just growing exasperated and thinking we would have to ship him back alone, when in walked the solution. She was rather bulgy, and she wore putty-coloured clothes, and had a putty complexion, rather like a cold pudding with eyes like currants that someone had pressed too far into its surface.

But she was the daughter of a peeress, and she wanted to marry someone who would take her out to the colonies. She never said why she wanted to go there, but perhaps I was too distracted to ask her, for when she opened her bag to take out her handkerchief several picture press cuttings fluttered casually to the floor.

I stooped to pick them up, and looked at them on the way, as I believe she really intended me to do. It was too good to be true. There she was, with all her bulges, standing broadside to the camera in a page of the *Tatler*. There were others of her, generally with a tin, collecting for charity, and never looking particularly glamorous. But she was there—definitely—in the *Tatler*.

She had no money, and she did not seem to have any particular gift which might replace this contingency, but we knew that did not matter. There was quite a chance she would qualify for 'one's friends in Calcutta.'

And she did. They got engaged in about three days, and I never heard a murmur of complaint about the bulges or the putty.

But there was still one last fence before the wedding Calcutta's mother was a landlady in Scotland, where she lived in comparative comfort and prosperity. She, poor soul, had to be sacrificed on the altar of 'one's friends,' and before the wedding could be announced in *The Times* she was banished to one room in Cannes, where she would both add glamour to the announcement and not be expected to turn up at the wedding.

How her son managed it I don't know, but her exile was effected in about ten days and the wedding took place directly she was safely out of the way.

We often wonder how they are getting on. And whether the wife ever gets awkward over it when he talks about 'one's friends at Londonderry House.' For this, I learned from someone who knew him in India, was his watchword there although he had never been inside Londonderry House in his life. Anyway, they seemed delighted with each other when they left.

In a sense, though a travesty of it, these two were a fulfilment of the reason I first thought of starting the Marriage Bureau when I was coming home from India.

But there is another side of our work besides the actual match-making, which to me is just as gratifying in its results as a successful marriage. I discovered it soon after we first opened.

She was thirty-four and she wore a putty-coloured coat. I do not know why so many unattractive women wear putty, but they do. She had a hat like one in a Belcher cartoon, and underneath it a face that had no sort of visible attraction beyond a reasonably clear skin. She wore glasses, quite presentable up-to-date glasses, but on her they made one think of Dorothy Parker's line: 'men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses,' just because her whole appearance was so mouse-like and ordinary. As she walked into the room, and she did not walk badly, we had a view of

legs in putty-coloured woollen stockings, and shoes that came out in long thin points—just the kind of English shoes that Americans laugh at so justifiably.

From her few shy scraps of information it was easy to picture her setting. She lived in a village in Somerset, a typical English village with a church, a post-office, an inn and some retired elderly inhabitants. Her days were spent doing 'social work,' visiting the chronic invalids, arranging the flowers in the sanctuary and having passions for the vicar.

Before her lay the rest of her life, along the same dull narrow channel, with no delicious turning that would suddenly whisk her out into some gay adventure. She was locked in a prison of her own making, because she lacked the initiative to turn the key and walk out of it. Then by chance, she had seen the column in the newspaper about the Marriage Bureau.

"Mrs. Fane, the doctor's wife, had given me some flowers from her garden that she thought would go round the font. She'd wrapped them up in a newspaper, and when I was undoing them in the vestry I couldn't help it but I'm afraid I caught sight of the column about you. And I thought perhaps . . ."

"So you came to us because you would rather like to get married and you just don't get a chance of meeting anybody where you live? Well, that's exactly what we're here for, so we'll see what can be done. I expect you've got some idea of the type of man that appeals to you. And you know whether you like living in the country, in Town or abroad. Are you fond of children? Would you mind taking on a widower with a ready-made family, or would you rather meet a bachelor? I do like to know all these little things because they help me so much. Also I'd like you to fill in this form, giving me a few more details about yourself."

I had to come to the rescue with a rush because she was suffused with a deep blush which covered the whole of her

face and neck. There is usually a psychological moment in the first interview when we have to be very quick on the mark to make people feel they are not doing anything mad and extraordinary in coming to the Marriage Bureau. Once that critical moment has passed they generally put themselves happily into our care and cease to worry.

She was suddenly appalled at what she had done. Mentally she had split in half, and one half of her had taken this dazzling plunge, while the other was shocked at her daring. It was up to me to reconcile the two halves.

When she first walked into the room she seemed a hopeless proposition, and merely that very sad object, a young and unattractive spinster. But while she was talking I was wondering whether I could not somehow re-create her and make her into the person she wanted to be. After all she *had* got a good clear skin and she spoke in a rather sweet, appealing little voice. In some way she *was* appealing. Surely, if one could pick out that appeal, strip away all that concealed it and present it in a re-created human being, this would be a really satisfactory achievement. I decided to try.

By now her blushes had receded, she was relaxed from her tension like a dormouse uncurled in the first Spring sunshine, and was waiting as a delighted audience for the next act in her own enthralling drama. She had given me her complete trust and confidence, and become what a surgeon with a difficult operation to perform would call 'a good patient.'

"To begin with, I don't think you make the best of yourself." I said it quite kindly and uncritically. "I would like to show you what an attractive person you really are."

She smiled and said nothing. Already she was happier probably than she had ever been since she was a child.

Straight away, before she could return to her old life, and the shocked half could gain possession of her again, I whisked her off to choose some underclothes. Not to an austere shop that would register ill-concealed distaste at the kind of things I believed she might be wearing, but to

one in the purlieus round Piccadilly Circus, that sold pretty things and yet was used to replacing strange relics, even rags, without a sign of astonishment.

While she was still in this rather dazed condition at what she had done, we undressed her, a process that was full of strange revelations.

It is hard to believe, but she had two petticoats both gathered round a tape at her waist. She wore the kind of stays the Government now say are holding up aircraft production. She had thick dark wool knickers with elastic round the waist and legs and one of those things our grandmothers wore called a camisole, which could add any amount of matronly years to the prettiest young bosom.

Hidden beneath all these atrocities she really had a very neat little figure, and it was easy to fit her with a few dainty underclothes. I'm afraid the saleswoman and I exchanged a wink behind the fitting-room door, and the wardrobe belonging to her former life went into a West End dustbin.

Next I took her to get a good tailor-made suit and an attractive dress, coat and hat, smart shoes and several pairs of silk stockings. While the tailor-made was being altered I took her to the hairdresser.

It would have been easy to spend a fortune on her, but she only had £300 a year from a legacy, and maybe she was going to need a little spending money the next few weeks, so I somehow managed to get the whole transformation done for £20. When she looked in the glass she was so delighted with herself that I do not think she would have cared whether it had cost her £20 or £200.

Now that she was re-created I was so pleased with the result I felt the rest would be easy going. We had even arranged for her to have a holiday in Town, away from the elderly aunt whose house she shared in Somerset. I was really very proud of her.

But I had never taken into consideration the whole mass of inhibitions that were still to be contended with, or the violent swing-over that would follow their collapse.

I had sent her out with a retired civil servant who we felt was a kind, unselfish, reliable person who would give her confidence in the male sex straight away.

Next morning the telephone rang.

"Can I come and see you?"

"Well, is it very important? Can't you tell me over the 'phone, because I'm frantically busy."

"No, it's so awful I can't possibly tell you on the telephone."

"Very well then, come round in half an hour."

I put down the receiver, feeling very apprehensive. Had I made a frightful mistake in sending her out with that man, whom I really thought any mother would have willingly trusted with her youngest débutante daughter.

She came in like a ruffled chicken.

"He kissed me," she announced dramatically. "In the taxi going home."

"Well, why did you let him kiss you if you didn't want him to?"

Her face settled when she saw I did not regard it as a very startling event.

"Should one let a man kiss you the first day he meets you?"

The interview was growing difficult.

"Well, it really all depends on the man, and how much you like him. But if I were you I wouldn't let him kiss you the first time—perhaps later if you really like him an awful lot—but not unless you do."

"How do you approach a man?" she asked suddenly, as though she were enquiring how to put a halter on a horse that was loose in a field.

"You don't."

She looked incredulous.

"No. You see," I went on, feeling the conversation was getting harder still, "it's the man's job to approach you and he doesn't like his job taken away from him."

How could I ever begin to teach her all the things that

others know by instinct; the intricacies of genuine feminine naïveté; how the most elusive and detached were the most sought after?

Her very eagerness to attract was going to send her three steps back every time she took one forward. This much I did manage to explain to her, but the attitude of mind was still there, and I was afraid it would suddenly pop through any clumsy covering she might manage to draw over it.

I had visions of her when she was married; of her waiting hand and foot on her spoilt lord, trying so desperately hard to please that he would despise her efforts, not exactly knowing why. It would be pathetic, like the work she would put into the sanctuary flowers and then spend the whole service hoping the vicar noticed them.

But that was far ahead, and we had not even found her a husband yet. I was afraid the next part of her story would be slow and disappointing, and that she would end by returning to the Somerset village, resigned to the fate from which she had risen in such daring revolt. But instead it made the most startling progress, and my little sanctuary mouse underwent such a terrifying change that I began to think my re-creation had gone ahead of me most alarmingly.

It did end by her going back to Somerset for a while, but I think only to allow her finances to recover from her holiday in Town. She was still corresponding with someone very profusely and using our office as a forwarding address (I think because she was frightened of the aunt).

Meanwhile, besides the civil servant, she had run through an M.P., a bookseller, a farmer, a naval officer and a textile manufacturer in the space of about five months. Only this time it was always the men who fell back from her unabashed advance.

One day a letter from her arrived at the office, to be forwarded to the young man she was writing to. We noticed that she had forgotten to close it down: it was very overladen, and as I picked it up a snapshot tumbled out. I looked at it. There was my sanctuary mouse, standing full

view in a pair of very short scanty knickers, and the bares: little bust bodice, like an acrobatic dancer in a theatrical revue.

Feeling rather as if I were dreaming, I pushed it back into the envelope, and in doing so I caught sight of a second snapshot—the same, only back view.

The end of the story was that she did marry the young man who had the letter with the snapshots, and the last we heard was that they were very happy. And while I still take a special interest in grooming drab young women, I have learned that they may have to be curbed directly they get into their new disguise, for it goes to their heads like wine.

Chapter III

Problems of the Marriage Bureau—The missionaries—Mothers and daughters—Banker who put in his will that his daughters were to join the Marriage Bureau when he died—A father puts his three sons on the books—The shy girl—Hundreds of nurses—A misguided publicity scheme

IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS WE WERE BESET WITH PROBLEMS. For a long time we had on our books a large number of aristocratic girls and mostly working-class men. Then we had an influx of widows for whom we had to find middle-aged husbands, preferably widowers, because they did not want to marry what they called 'a set bachelor.'

We gathered a 'set bachelor' was somebody who had already made a home for himself to his own liking and intended to move his wife into it like an extra piece of furniture—either that, or he was so accustomed to going his own sweet way that he would probably never be at home anyway. They imagined him womanish and fussy about the house, or else surrounded by collections that must never be dusted. At all events they thought he would be concreted into some way of living that would not appeal to them. Had this been the case, of course, the men would not have put their name on our books, but would have kept well away from wives, dusters or any other changes.

Quite early on we found that young men of about twenty-one to twenty-three were difficult to marry off—that is to say, those with a public school education followed by Oxford or Cambridge, who perhaps were articled to some profession or were just beginning a job. This is because most of the girls of twenty and twenty-one in that class want to marry

men of twenty-eight or thirty. In the normal way a girl might meet one of the younger ones and fall in love with him. Having fallen in love she decides to marry him and hopes that he will make a success of what he does. But if she is a client of the Marriage Bureau she naturally chooses to meet somebody whose success is more assured.

Working-class men of twenty-one to twenty-three are much easier because they probably started in their job at sixteen and have already held it down for several years. By this time they are earning quite a good salary, and as they have no traditional high standard of living to keep up they have saved as well.

Some of our earliest clients were missionaries (the first one came from the Gold Coast), and rather to our surprise and confusion we soon found we had half a dozen of them on the books at once. We thought they really were going to be a problem, until we discovered we could generally marry them to school-teachers, most of whom seemed to have a combined craze for religion and travel.

Ever since we opened we have nearly always had a steady half-dozen missionaries on our list, and they get snapped up quite quickly. They are generally in some remote part of Africa, from which they never seem to get leave, and the courtship usually takes place by post with an exchange of photographs as well. I suppose we are really a great service to them. It must be very exciting, when you are cut off from your own race somewhere quite lonely and uncivilized, perhaps for a lifetime, to be courting somebody by letter—and then persuading her into making the journey of her life to share a rather hard pillow at the farthest end of the Christian earth.

As far as we possibly can, we try to persuade every client who is near enough to come to the office for an interview; but sometimes the distance or their jobs prevent them from coming to see us until they have been corresponding with us for quite a while. We do find that you can get to know a person quite well from letters—perhaps because they are

less shy over writing their innermost thoughts than they would be talking about them, which perhaps is why the postal courtships seem to turn out so well.

Now and again we get a shock when we see people. There was a young woman dispenser from the Midlands who wrote us wonderful letters, and when she eventually came to see us she turned out to be a grotesquely plain young woman who had tried to get herself up as a novelette vamp. She wore a long dress before lunch, a fur cape, a turban, and quantities of different-coloured necklaces. When she was talking she drooped in affected languor before the fire-place, while a pair of bony little hands fluttered nervously among the beads. It was the hands that reminded us that she was not a pantomime character but really a pathetic human being in search of happiness.

Had we asked her for a photograph we should have been saved the shock. We did begin by having photographs sent to the office, but we soon got so flooded with them—people *would* send *all* their photographs, beginning with a fat infant sprawling on a bearskin rug—that we had to ask them only to send them to each other.

A surprising number of our clients are mothers and daughters, both of whom are on our books; but in many cases the mothers are most anxious that we should conceal this fact from their daughters.

Mrs. Smart, for instance, came in like a breezy shopper.

"I've come about my daughter," she announced brightly, and we felt she was going to be business-like and easy to deal with.

She was good-looking, graceful and knew how to dress. And we hoped fervently that the daughter had inherited her attributes, for we sometimes find that very smart mothers have unattractive daughters.

"Can you tell us how old your daughter is, what she is like, and something about the kind of person you think she

would like to marry?" I asked, when we had settled her in a chair.

"I want her to marry somebody with plenty of money, a good social background, and a great many friends."

It was exactly like a visit to the milliner, and she had probably chosen all the girl's clothes for her the same way.

"Then she's fond of entertaining?" I said politely. I was wondering whether the puppet daughter was even going to be allowed to fill in her own form.

But the mother was bent on her shopping expedition.

"Who have you got?" she asked briskly.

Somehow I would have to explain to her that we were not the poulterer's, where she could have all the goods laid on the counter and pick out the plumpest bird ready to carry it away.

"Well, I expect there are some young men on the books that your daughter might like to meet. But first of all I should have to have all kinds of details as to the kind of person she would be happy with. We want to get a very good idea of what she is like herself and the kind of person she wants to marry. Then we can choose some likely young man for her. I think, as you live in London, it would really be best if I could meet her."

"Oh, but she's not to know I've come to you."

I suggested I should go to tea with them as an ordinary guest, and we could talk about young men quite incidentally. So it was settled that I went to tea one Sunday.

I had no idea what form the conversation would take, but I was afraid it might still only be between the mother and myself. It was.

For half the afternoon Mrs. Smart extolled her Rosalind, while the daughter twisted her handkerchief round and round her wrist and stared at my hat. I saw a slim, attractive, dove-like girl of twenty-one with pretty hair and enormous grey eyes. In the first five minutes I was wondering how I could get her alone and whether she would confide in me when I did.

I thought it polite and more diplomatic to wait until the maternal extravaganza came to an end; so I nodded and smiled automatically, waiting for a chance to pick up the conversation and take it over myself; but, having finished her sales talk about Rosalind, the mother made a clumsy dive into the subject of matrimony.

"I've always said that directly a girl grows up she ought to think seriously about getting married and having a lovely home of her own. Isn't that so, Miss Oliver?" she asked, holding the teapot in mid-air.

Fortunately I was not expected to reply.

"It's stupid to waste time over silly things like a career, when there are such wonderful things as a real home love nest and darling babies waiting to be born. Could *you* understand *anybody* wanting to put off thinking seriously about anything so wonderful, Miss Oliver?"

"Yes, I could, easily." I was startled at my own courage. "I think a girl might feel she needed to have a chance of meeting a good many people first and getting to understand them. And she could do this while she had the interest of her career. It would all help to make a better wife and one probably much happier, and easier to live with."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the handkerchief stop twisting.

Mrs. Smart's eyebrows had gone up quite a distance and she looked disapproving.

"Yes, but think of all the simply delicious things she is missing while she muddles round with that career," she crooned silkily.

I ventured to suggest the career might be successful.

This time the eyebrows descended in a frown of annoyance.

"I'm surprised at that coming from you, Miss Oliver," she said hastily. "Miss Oliver," she turned to Rosalind, "is an expert on marriage." And she then proceeded to

give a completely inaccurate description of the Marriage Bureau, which I bore patiently. In the middle of it she was called away to the telephone, and directly she left the room the girl became entirely self-possessed.

"Ma's a nuisance," she said laconically. "She always tries so hard to get me married, and as a matter of fact she's broken off three engagements for me."

"Intentionally?"

"Oh, no. She just scares everybody away, she's so embarrassing. Either that or I feel so ashamed of her anxiety to marry me off that I have to break off the engagement myself. I think it's really because she's terrified I'll be a secretary all my life, and that would be too boring for her."

"A lot of mothers are like that," I assured her, for we had already had to contend with several of them.

Then I arranged that I should introduce her to several young men whom she should meet away from her home and leave the mother out of the whole business.

We spent three months preventing Mrs. Smart from plunging into Rosalind's affairs, which took a good deal of tactful manœuvring. But eventually she was very happily married to a successful young solicitor.

One day we opened a letter from a daughter in Liverpool who asked us if we would try to find a husband for her mother.

' . . . She wants someone with a love of gaiety and enough money to live in comfort. She is the small feminine type and would probably prefer the kind of man who would fuss over her. I am enclosing a snap of her with my baby. I do hope you can do something about it. It seems such a pity for her to live alone when she could be happy making a home for someone.'

I supposed she was very fond of her mother and had been miserable about leaving her alone ever since she married.

One way and another we have a busy time with parents. There was a retired bank manager in Bath who wrote to us about his two daughters.

‘ . . . My wife died 18 months ago. If anything happened to me my daughters would be left very lonely,’ he said, ‘as they have made very few friends here and I consider that marriage to a proper man would be desirable in the event of my decease. They are too shy to make a move and if I do not do so on their behalf now I feel it would be too late.’

He then went on to describe the girls, and give full particulars of what their exact financial position would be when he died and what shares they held.

‘ . . . It is not proposed to make application to you till after my decease,’ he continued, ‘and then only if they (or either of them) wish to do so. In the meantime I wish to put the position fully before you so as to simplify matters later on.’

He was over eighty and the daughters were a long way under thirty. The dear old man must have felt he could not live much longer (he said he could only walk a few yards) and he was doing all he could to insure their future. Security had been his motto and he wanted it for them. He had guaranteed their financial security, but he could not guarantee them against loneliness. Perhaps he would like to have seen them married before he died so that his mind would be at rest on this point. And yet, if that was so, why did he ask us not to set our machinery going till after his death? Maybe he would miss the daughters as chauffeuses, because he mentioned they could both drive a car.

Anyway the meticulous financial brain had left all his affairs in exemplary order: and some day when the perfect

will is disclosed it will contain one surprise hidden in the pedantic phraseology.

So far this is the only time we have heard of the Marriage Bureau being featured in a will.

One mother asked us to have her son on the books so that we could introduce him to some of our loveliest clients and distract him from marrying a girl she thought was 'flighty.' He was quite eligible, so we gave him heaps of introductions and he took everybody out that we put him in touch with, so we imagined the plan must have succeeded. But he still married the 'flighty' one. He brought her in to see us one day when he announced they had fixed their wedding, and we liked her, and hope they are happy.

Then there was a great furore over a young Italian nobleman, whose family were really trying to sell his title to the highest bidder they could find.

First of all a friend of theirs came in to see us and find out all about us. Then we had a letter from Italy from the young man's father, whose English was a little extraordinary.

He wrote that his son had 'absolved all his studies in England,' and that he himself possessed an 'antic' palace at Rome and another in Naples, both of which, he said, were national monuments and full of valuable pictures.

'He does not care if his bride is Catholic or Protestant, though no Jewess according to the great difficulties set against them in Italy,' said the letter (this was in July 1939). 'The fortune of the young girl must be adequate to keep up to his title and the high rank she will occupy.'

The 'antic' palace had its appeal to several of our wealthier clients, so on the optimism of our reply the young man's mother came over to see us.

She asked to see some of the girls, and we were to arrange for them to go over to Paris and meet him there, and either Heather or I were going to be chaperones. We were looking

forward to it and were already trying to settle which of us went over (we both wanted to go and do some shopping) when the war drew nearer and the matter was dropped. I suppose they decided an English *châtelaine* to the palace might be rather inopportune, for they suddenly cancelled everything without any explanation and we never heard of them again.

We often come across match-making fathers as well as mothers, but the strangest one was the father who had three sons aged twenty-one, twenty-three and twenty-six.

He wanted us to send the girls down to their home in the country, so that he could decide which girl each son should take out. How he thought he was going to keep the matter under control at all we simply could not imagine. We did suggest there might be some sort of confusion, but he seemed to have a very definite idea as to how it would work out.

From his point of view it was quite a sensible plan. He had spent a great deal on his sons' education and had taken a lot of trouble to set them up in their careers, and he was naturally anxious that after all this they shouldn't have the drawback of an unfortunate marriage, so he proposed to take that question in hand as well.

Some of our girl clients lived in his district, and the father went round calling on them before they were allowed to meet his sons, who meanwhile came up to London to see us. They were extremely unspoilt and very charming.

Apparently the scheme was successful, as they were devoted to the father (we liked him, too) and quite welcomed his help in choosing their wives. I think they all got on very well together, and the girls used to say they loved going there.

Since then the middle son has married one of our clients and the eldest one is courting another who, we think, is going to marry him.

Many of the difficulties we anticipated at the beginning did not seem to occur. We were afraid some of the clients might be given to romancing about themselves and we

should never get at the truth, or that they would fill in their forms inaccurately. We find, however, that people are extraordinarily honest about themselves, and we often get a woman filling in the description of her figure as 'well upholstered' instead of concealing it, like some of them do, behind the vague term 'average' (which we discovered may mean anything up to fifteen stone).

We usually have no trouble in getting people to talk about themselves, and probably in no other circumstances would they talk, or write, so freely. It seems almost as though it is a relief to them to turn out all the cupboards of their mind and put the contents on a table to be dusted and rearranged.

One very taking little Yorkshire stenographer came and told us all about her shyness.

I think the mere fact of having braved coming to us had given her a new sort of confidence when she arrived for her interview.

"I was sitting in the dentist's waiting-room when I read your advertisement," she said, "and then I thought of the old saying: 'If you don't help yourself no one else will.'"

"You see," she hesitated, "it's very difficult to explain, but if I'm with anybody I like or admire, either men or women, I always appear at my worst. I get embarrassed and self-conscious, and so tongue-tied they must think I'm awfully dumb. Yet I can't understand it, because when I'm introduced to strangers it never seems to trouble me. I think it must be why I never get taken out more than once by any young man, because I'm such a terrible flop directly they get to know me."

I saw her sad little procession of friendships that tailed off so needlessly. Each time she began a fresh one she would anticipate its fall, and the same fit of nerves would take control.

If she could have one success she would probably be cured for life, so somehow or other we must nurse her beyond the danger-point with anyone she met. It might

even be best to confide in a young man and enlist him on our side to help.

"I expect it's only because directly you like a person you're over-anxious to please them, and that unconsciously puts you out and makes you unnatural. If you could only make up your mind you didn't care a scrap whether they liked you or not you would get on grandly. Because you see you have an ample amount of simple natural charm."

Her eyes opened widely and a look of relief came over her face.

"It's partly that," I went on, "and partly that you mayn't have met many people. If you had a much wider circle of friends, so that it didn't matter much if you lost one now and then, you'd probably never get those fits of shyness again."

Her story ended happily, because I used to tell the young men I introduced her to that she was liable to get a sudden fit of unaccountable shyness and they all managed to get her past it. Quite soon afterwards she married one of them and settled down in her native Yorkshire.

About a hundred of the women on our books at any time are nurses. There are more nurses than anything else and all are very keen to get married—so much so that we often wonder why they ever bothered to take up nursing at all.

A few of them only suddenly think of getting married because their best friend has married, and then, having realized that no young man is taking enough interest in them, they come to us.

We had a young midwife like that who was only twenty-nine.

"My best friend, whom I work with, married last week, and we were always together so I shall miss her terribly. This is an awful blow and I feel once she goes I shall get into a groove from which there's no escape," she explained.

It often strikes us how strange it is the way people will settle in a groove and sit in it for years without realizing it. Then suddenly some stray thing (like hearing of the Marriage

Bureau) will stir them and they come hurrying to us to pull them out of it.

Our midwife had another reason for wanting to get married. She had developed into a type which was far removed from her romantic conception of what she would like to be.

"I'm kind Auntie Brown, whom dozens of worried mothers ring up for advice," she said, "and I feel I shall be kind Auntie Brown till the day I die if I don't give myself a jerk."

We were ready to try and help her change her type and set her up again in her own estimation. But in the end she was so much in demand for her work that she did not get much time to come and see us, and I think she decided to remain in the role of 'kind auntie' in which, after all, she had made such a success. Probably, too, she got over the friend's marriage, and did not mind so much whether she got married herself.

Nurses, we find, are easy to marry off if they come to us young. But nurses over thirty are very difficult and we have to work hard over them. I think the men do not like them much because they are apt to get bossy and to develop a domineering strain of which they fight shy.

The news of the Marriage Bureau spread very quickly, but in a rather misguided moment we thought we would try a little original publicity.

Instead of ordinary circulars we had silver printed cards done out like wedding invitations:

MARY OLIVER AND HEATHER JENNER

REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF FINDING

MR. JAMES BROWN

A PARTNER IN MARRIAGE.

THEY ARE IN THEIR OFFICE FROM

10 A.M. TILL 5 P.M.

AND EVERYTHING IS PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

R.S.V.P.

THE MARRIAGE BUREAU.

These we sent out in hundreds to people whose addresses we got from the telephone directory, and we thought everybody would be enchanted with them and that we should have hundreds of delighted replies.

Next morning I took my first telephone call of the day.

"What are you doing to Mr. Brown?" An angry feminine voice pierced my ear.

"Mr. Brown?" I murmured foggily, rather taken aback.

"Don't tell me you don't know. I want to know what you're trying to lead him into." Her tone lashed me again.

"But I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. I want an explanation, and anyway I'm going to call the police. Sending that disgraceful thing to a respectable married man."

Then I remembered our lovely silver-printed invitations.

"Oh, you've had one of our new circulars," I said benignly, though I felt very flustered at the unexpected nature of the response to our cherished campaign.

"Circulars! It's criminal, and I'm taking it straight to the police station."

"I'm very sorry it should have been sent in error to a married man," I apologized, "but I don't think it's a crime. If you got a circular asking you to drink Bovril and you didn't like Bovril, you wouldn't take it to Scotland Yard."

That minute she cut me off, leaving me with a sinking heart, wondering if all our circulars had had the same effect.

I had not long to wait. All day we were interrupted by angry men and women accusing us of trying to break up their homes. We had a very disturbing time for weeks afterwards, because the secretary had amused herself by picking out all kinds of celebrities and public men who were resentful enough to call up Scotland Yard and complain.

We did, however, have plenty of the right kind of response as well, and about fifty per cent of the people to whom we sent them answered the invitations enthusiastically, and came on the books.

A few of the married ones to whom we unwittingly sent the 'wedding invitations' were evidently most amused, and took it all in very good part.

We had one nice refusal from a Norfolk bachelor.

Mr. ——— begs to inform Mesdames Oliver and Jenner that the receipt of their kind offer to find him a partner in marriage has given him a great shock, to recover from which he will be obliged to degustate a good bottle of burgundy.

Having by the Grace of God and a good deal of luck arrived at a mature age without succumbing *en permanence* to feminine charms, the sight of his name surrounded by silver print struck home like a blitzkrieg.

These ladies, his correspondents, will gather from the above that Mr. ——— has every intention of dying, as he has lived, in single blessedness (provided his luck still holds and his mental balance does not become upset), and that, therefore, he can hold out no hope that he can avail himself of the, no doubt, most efficient services of Mesdames Oliver and Jenner.

We also liked the reply we had from a married man, who wrote and told us that he had been married for years, and gave us the names and addresses of some of his friends and relations who were still single.

Chapter IV

Discussions in the waiting-room—A mother and child—Rush house—Some of the many diplomatic tasks involved—Odd visitors—The fortune tellers—Couple who got engaged by post—How the Marriage Bureau checks on whether people are genuine—Guiding courtships—Introducing the Bureau wallflower

OUR RECEPTIONIST HAS AN INTERESTING TIME AND A GOOD deal of responsibility. Merely by her presence she must make people feel that they are not doing anything out of the ordinary in calling at the Marriage Bureau—it might be the photographer's, the hairdresser or anywhere else they go to in the normal way. Her manner reassures them. She welcomes them, notes their appointment, and if there is a rush she asks them to wait.

In those few seconds she has carried them past the phase of longing to turn round and run down the stairs again. She has also transmitted the idea that we ourselves are equally business-like, and that the whole thing will not be a bit embarrassing after all.

Her desk is in the waiting-room, and once, after a very busy afternoon I asked her what it had been like out there. I imagined it must be very similar to a dentist's waiting-room (without the atmosphere of apprehension) where everybody looks at everyone else to see if they have false teeth and tries to mesmerize his neighbour into giving up the newest magazine.

On this particular afternoon nobody read the magazines at all. One man, who was a civil servant from Glasgow, sat leaning forward on the edge of the sofa with his head well

down in his collar and studied the floor. He looked like an ostrich that had buried its head in the sand. Perhaps after travelling down on the night train he felt that way, but I am inclined to think he does it all the time, so unless I can find a female ostrich for him he may be difficult to marry off. In any case we can never get much out of him as to what he wants. He only talks in monosyllables and never emerges from his shell at all.

Beside him a bright-eyed young woman in a bonnet hat with mink on it looked as if she were waiting to see a very exciting mannequin parade. Every time anyone new came into the room she watched them with quick, bird-like turns of her head. Then she glanced at her small child with a kind of melting, reproachful 'don't-stare-at-strangers' expression on her face, as though it would make everybody forget she had stared at them herself.

The child weathered these reproaches by avoiding her eye. She was quite a pretty little girl of five, and she wore a bonnet hat exactly like the mother's—even to the mink trimming.

The ostrich man interested her intensely. She leant against her mother's knee and studied the top of his head. Then she swung one foot about till she kicked him gently on the shin.

Whether he felt the impact of the small kid shoe one could not tell, but he did not look up. So she tried sliding her foot to and fro along the floor under his face, till he must have felt that if he did not respond soon she would be making a fool of him. The mother was probably afraid to stop her in case the child disobeyed and made her look a fool, too. Anyway, the sliding went on until the next client made her forget it.

This time it was a Naval officer. The receptionist knew he had been corresponding with some of our girl clients till he came home from China. And he had come to ask us whether the girl who wrote him the most entertaining letters was also the most attractive one for him to meet first. While

he waited he dragged a bunch of letters out of his pocket and began reading them.

The mother looked round the room more brightly than ever. She was not interested in the ostrich man and she did not mind if he never raised his head, but here was somebody more promising. And she smiled encouragingly at the child, who was watching the bunch of letters as though the Naval officer were going to do a trick with them.

But a child is never a good ally under any subtle circumstances. The interest in the Naval officer was only transitory and her attention returned to the ostrich man. She tried a fresh kick, less casual than the first one, and perhaps it was the pain inflicted on an old wound that made him move his foot a couple of inches. That, of course, delighted her; she was like a cat playing with a mouse, waiting for it to move again. The mother opened her mouth to remonstrate, but decided it would only start a scene if she did and draw quite the wrong sort of attention to herself.

Meanwhile, Heather and I were talking to a Jew with six daughters who was trying to make a bargain with us over the fees.

Suddenly there was a loud babble of voices and two women burst into the silent waiting-room. One was middle-aged and very smart, looking her best in expensive tweeds, while the other was younger and less metallic; she wore myriads of little frills and bows on the bosom of her frock.

"Now, darling, you go in first. I'll sit here and read the papers."

The older woman took up *Vogue* and began rustling through its pages.

"No, Loo, darling, it's your turn."

"Well, I'm only going to pop in and out."

"So am I."

"Nonsense, darling—after having lunch and tea *and* dinner with the same man you'll have a lot to tell Miss Oliver."

"I don't know whether I shall see him again."

"But how absurd; didn't you ask him to call you up?"

"No, I just hoped he would."

"Supposing he doesn't?"

"I only saw him yesterday."

"You sound very lukewarm about him, darling. I believe you're going to let him slip through your fingers. If I'd met him he would have telephoned me first thing this morning and told me what *hours* it seemed since he saw me last night."

"Who *did* you meet, darling?" asked the younger one, suddenly growing defensive.

"Oh, he had lots of money and a Rolls Royce, but the Rolls Royce was a very old model and he was so dull he might have been stuffed."

"Did he like you very much?"

"Fascinated, darling."

Just as the people in the waiting-room felt they were going to hear the complete private diary of these two women the secretary warned me they were there, and we decided to get them out of the way first.

They always come in together, and the elder one, Mrs. Mannering, manoeuvres her friend, Miss Knox, into having her interview first. Then, having previously drawn all the information she can out of her about the men she has met, she comes and tells us that she does not think Mr. — is quite the type for Miss Knox and how much better it would be if *she* were introduced to him.

According to her every man she meets is 'fascinated' with her. Actually they usually invite her out to lunch and she takes them back to tea at her flat, which is full of taffeta cushions and smells faintly of Harris tweed scent (she always wears expensive tweeds and diamonds). After that she rings them up incessantly for days and frightens them away. Meanwhile she becomes more and more determined to pin one down, chiefly because she wants to be relieved of the worries of a dwindling alimony.

Miss Knox, on the other hand, is far from pushing, and

gets on quite well with the men she meets—until Mrs. Mannering arrives on the scene and tries to annex them, which promptly frightens them away.

One would think that sooner or later the friendship might be broken up on this count, as Miss Knox would very much like to get married. She seems very complaisant over it, however, and watches Mrs. Mannering's skirmishes quite blandly before she comes to us for another introduction.

As usual, that morning we gave her a new introduction and put fresh heart into her. Afterwards she joined her friend, who was waiting outside ready to ask whom she was going to meet next.

Then the mink bonnet came in with the small child. It was her first appearance, and when they walked in dressed alike I wondered whether she always took her about as part of her outfit.

I found it a little embarrassing, while the child stared penetratingly at me, to be discussing her future stepfather. Especially as the mother went into all kinds of domestic details of how the father had fallen short and could be improved upon by number two.

Heather tried hard to come to the rescue and divert the child's attention, but she preferred to stay and drink in the conversation, though she did take her eyes off me for a time while she helped herself to the paper-clips on my desk and put them in her muff. I could not help wondering whether she did much the same thing when her mother was talking to the girl behind the sweet counter.

As a proposition for the Marriage Bureau the mother was promising, as she was really quite attractive, and we introduced her to all the men who might suit her and who did not mind an encumbrance. But she used to drag her little girl along and tell them all that the child was provided for until she was fifteen. And when they thought that in ten years' time they would be landed with a fat school-girl, who might also be terribly plain, for whom they would have to provide limitless pocket-money, they used to take fright.

In fact, she made it look as though her main objective was to get the child fixed up with a father, which I think was partly a form of feminine pride and partly a way of not appearing too over-anxious herself. Eventually we had to suggest tactfully that she kept the child more in the background.

The waiting-room had been full all morning, and we found that by now we often had to interview as many as thirty clients in one day. But having a rush in this new office was nothing compared to the complications in the attic where we began.

There we had no waiting-room, so we made people climb the ladder and go through the trap-door on to the roof to relieve the congestion on the stairs. They must have thought we possessed the most delectable roof-garden up there (perhaps it was the way we invited them up), but there was nothing beyond a grimy square of concrete surrounded by chimney-pots.

While we were interviewing somebody in the office we heard them tramping up and down above our heads, and we used to get terribly nervous lest they were growing angry. Fortunately it was late spring and nobody seemed to mind. I do not think we were ever overcrowded on a rainy day, chiefly because so many of the clients come to see us in their best clothes.

Although it was consoling to think they were not on the roof these days, I still found a rush of clients a strain, merely because you simply cannot be too hurried and businesslike over people's matrimonial problems. They all want to tell their life-story in such detail. And I like to hear it, both in order to get to know them and also to make them feel they can put their confidence in me.

We have to learn their character off by heart as well as their looks, and be able to carry it in our heads when we are looking out a possible mate for them. Details like their income, hobbies, and what kind of partner they want, can all be written down and filed. But their character and

disposition cannot be docketed so easily and we have to remember them as clearly as their faces.

This often has to be done while there are endless interruptions on the telephone. Somebody has lost the address of a girl we put them in touch with—could they have it again? Another person wants to register. Do we really have *nice* people on our books? I tell them yes, we have hundreds of nice people, would they like us to send them a form to look at? Then a young man rings up to find out what headway he is making with the girl he is taking out. I am non-committal except to say I know she liked him and she told me how much she had enjoyed her last outing. We never try to push on the courtship or make use of our clients' confidences.

Next a young woman rings through and talks about the weather. I discuss it patiently, until the casual little sentence comes along, flung with such studied carelessness into the rain.

"I went out with Mr. — and I haven't heard from him since. Is he away or something?"

Mr. — is going out now with another client because he complained this one was too old and he thought she might run to fat.

"Oh, I think he's working very hard just now," I tell her, struggling to remember whether he has any profession at all. "How about your meeting someone else in the meantime? I'll send you another introduction."

And I make a mental note that it must be done at once. If I think she's the type who might try and run him to earth again I tell her: "Oh, yes, he told me he thought you were a very nice girl, and he admired your looks, but he thought you were a little too *young* for him." And I quickly pull another partner out of the bag, having decided to send her out with someone who likes plumpness, just in case she does run to fat in a few years' time.

Or it may be a girl complaining of a man, or a couple who have had a scene. And often I get incomprehensible

calls from some client who has a friend in the next room listening to the conversation, somebody they do not want to know they have joined the Marriage Bureau. It's rather like doing a verbal acrostic, and as I cannot suddenly appear very stupid in front of the client I am interviewing, it tends to be awkward.

That day, as usual, I had all this sort of thing to contend with, as well as the morning's mail of nearly three hundred letters, of which we had only answered a quarter before the clients began arriving.

In the middle of this whirl a very striking young woman was shown in to see me and I thought she was a client.

"I've got the perfect bust bodice," she announced with a flashing smile.

I struggled to get over my astonishment at this extraordinary opening to the conversation.

"It's just what all your brides will want to have," she continued.

It dawned on me she was trying to sell me something, and a dreadful apprehension came over me that she was going to smother my desk with corsets just before a male visitor arrived.

"Have you got a floppy bust, Miss Oliver?"

I was speechless.

"Because if you have you probably hide its alluring beauty in a cumbersome bust bodice. Now I've got a bust bodice that holds you firm without hiding the beauty of the feminine line. It makes you look just as attractive as if you were naked, and you have no shoulder straps and nothing to show that you have any garment on at all. Would you like to see it?" she finished proudly.

Before I could answer she flung open her coat, and I saw she had no blouse and no underclothes above her waist. All she was wearing were two pieces of pale pink adhesive plaster with holes in the middle. She certainly had a lovely figure and really did not need to wear a bust bodice at all. I was curious to know how the same contraption would look

on someone less gracefully moulded, and was trying to picture it on several of our clients who immediately sprang to my mind.

"It's very good of you to bring them along," I began, "but we really shouldn't have time . . ."

"Never mind," she pursued, "I just want you to *wear* one *yourself*, so that you can't *help* telling your clients about it."

And she took a couple of her 'bust bodices' out of her handbag and flung them on my desk before she went. I just had time to push them under the blotting paper before a very pompous elderly stockbroker was shown in to discuss his marriage.

That night, out of curiosity, I thought I would try them on. I regretted it for three weeks, because that was the time it took before I could get them off. I lay in overheated baths and then tried to peel them away, but they clung villainously to the soft skin on such a tender part of my anatomy, and at each attempt I winced and gave it up. Until at last they became so grubby I was forced to be more brave, and in an excruciating struggle I got them off.

We had all kinds of startling visitors soon after the Marriage Bureau was into its stride. Prams, maternity gowns and nursery furniture, all had very insistent representatives who came to the office at awkward times. They used to get in to see us by saying: "Yes" when the secretary asked them if they were registered with us.

Fortune-tellers were the greatest invasion we had. I should think nearly all the fortune-tellers in the country turned up on our doorstep. Their great idea was to start a kind of racket with us: when Mr. X was walking out with Miss Y we were to send him along to her, and she would tell him he was going to marry a slim, fair girl (making him believe this must be the girl he was taking out), and so hurrying up the marriage. And to make things doubly sure Miss Y was to go and have her fortune told, too.

We had a busy time putting off the fortune-tellers. But

one could not be discouraged so easily as she wanted to register with us. She kept a seaside boarding-house and fortune-telling was her side-line, which she found quite profitable on rainy days at the seaside.

According to her circular she could divine your future from tea-leaves, cards, bumps, and everything imaginable. On the same circular her boarding-house was said to be 'only a stone's-throw from the sea.' And one was assured that every room had a sea view.

She asked me to go down and see her (I think she hoped I would send honeymoon couples there) so I decided to go for the day one week-end.

When I got there I found it was a long way from the shore, and if you wanted to look at the sea you had to open the windows and put your head right out and nearly twist your neck trying to see it round the corner. Inside, the house was crammed with the antimacassar type of furniture and faded snapshots, while the rooms smelt of damp plush and stale cooking.

I had lunch with all the lodgers, while the fortune-teller landlady sat at the head of the table and told me how psychic she was.

She informed me she could see something passing over her left shoulder. I couldn't gather what this phantom shape was, except that it had some great significance with how I was going to affect her future. Actually I think her psychic illusions were closely connected with a bottle of gin, so I carefully evaded putting her on the books.

The next visit I made was very different. It was to a very charming middle-aged peeress, who had divorced her husband. She felt she would be happier if she married again, and that it would be better for her two daughters to have a man to look after them.

"I don't wish my girls to know about this," she said. "If I do meet anyone I must pretend he is an old friend—anyway to start with."

When she invited me to go down and see her she asked

me to say I was in the V.A.D. with her in the last war. So I had to write and explain that as I was in long clothes in the last war I did not think that introduction for me would be very convincing.

I believe she thoroughly enjoyed putting her name down with us.

"I feel I'm doing an awful thing really," she said with a delighted giggle when we met. "What *would* my relations say!"

And she looked as if she had just ordered six dizzy new hats after wearing a dull one for years.

We are quite accustomed to people being shy about letting anyone know they have joined the Marriage Bureau. And we frequently have situations where the clients ask us not to give them away in front of their families or friends. In any case, we write to them in plain envelopes, and we never leave telephone messages from 'The Marriage Bureau' to be put on the hall table.

We liked the couple we had who got engaged by post, and did not want either of their parents to know they had met through us, much less that they had never even seen each other.

They made me say they had met on his last leave at a party at my house. She was a Colonel's daughter in Cheltenham and he was a successful young business man in Delhi. They wrote to each other for over a year and then she sailed out to Delhi and married him.

When they got engaged she went down to stay with his people at a large country house in Devon, where she had a great success and they all liked her very much.

Last December they sent us a Christmas card with a photograph taken on their wedding day, and inside they had written a little note to say how happy they were.

Dear Mary Oliver,

Just a line from two very happy people to wish you all the very best and thanks for what you did for us. It's

all really marvellous and we hope to come home one day and tell you all about it.

And their respective parents do not know to this day that they met by post through the Marriage Bureau.

We are so often asked how we know whether clients genuinely want to get married. To begin with we can usually tell by talking to them when we get all their particulars.

Very few men who are not serious would come to us and pay five guineas, and fill in our long form, when they could meet any number of girls at cocktail parties or dance halls without their meeting being recorded on paper.

If, on the other hand, we should get an application from a man or woman whose intentions are dishonourable, it is very easy for us to find them out. For we always ask both sides to tell us what they think of each other. And should there be any complaints we then send the offending party out with someone we know, whose judgment we can rely on. They will come back and tell us their honest opinion, and if there is anything wrong we say to the offender: "Look here. I'm very sorry. We've had two reports about you which we do not like. We are obliged to give you back your fee and take you off the books."

We also tell our clients that we give no references and we take no reference. But we do ask them, before they get engaged or married, to meet the opposite party's friends and relations, as they would do in the normal course of events were they not being married through the Marriage Bureau.

Many men spoil their chances at once by being mean when they take a girl out. No girl likes to feel that each extra sixpence he spends on her is searing him to the soul in spite of her attractive company. Without vaunting in a vulgar fashion that money is no object he can at least let it be of no concern when he is taking her out. She likes to be

made to feel that it does not matter a scrap if he spends the earth on a single evening, even though she probably knows it is going to matter considerably for the rest of the quarter.

If she is a quite ordinary thoughtful girl she will want to remain in the first restaurant they go to for the rest of the evening, rather than drag him to a string of night clubs to be fleeced in each of them: She may even suggest a simple evening, and put of pure consideration say she has a craze to go to a sandwich bar, just because she knows he has taken her out a good deal and his resources must be badly strained. But she likes that to come from her, and would think it a slight to her charm if he suggested it himself.

It is better to take a girl to the cinema once in the week and buy the best seats, than to make her queue for the cheaper ones two or three times. Not that it would be agony for her to sit in the cheaper seats, but just because she would rather have the compliment of being given the best. This is one of the rules that apply after marriage as well, for the reason that a man must never stop courting his wife.

We had a middle-aged commercial traveller on our books who fell down at once through being a trifle calculating over an afternoon's outing. He told us the story himself. (I think because he was afraid her version of it would be worse.)

"She wrote a letter to say I was twice her age and she didn't like one talking about expenses," he complained.

"My only mention about expenses was over the afternoon tea dance. If we had tea in the ballroom itself it was 2s. 9d. and if we had tea just at the door entrance it was only 1s. 6d. You see sometimes the ballroom is packed, and then you have to have tea on the landing entrance anyway. It makes no difference to the dancing."

"Yes, but I take it the ballroom wasn't packed," I explained, "and therefore you weren't exactly flattering her when you could bother so much about 1s. 3d. while you were in her company."

There are many things present young men forget, and of

which they might well be reminded. That a woman is a more fragile being than themselves and must be treated always like fine china. He must assume that even stepping over a kerb is a dangerous exploit, and watch her progress over it with a hand under her elbow.

If he is in a hurry not to miss the first act of the play he must forget it and not go racing ahead, leaving her to try and keep up like a faithful spaniel. Her comfort matters more to him than the empty seats in the stalls, even if she did keep him waiting when he called for her.

There is no one else in the room—and, in spite of what the French say about it, the English language does lend itself to pretty compliments. Everything he notices and likes about her he should mention, because if she is smart and attractive she will have taken trouble with herself, and the more she is appreciated the more beautiful she will look.

Nowadays we do not take on men clients who are not able to support a wife in at least a certain amount of comfort. A widower, for instance, who only had £3 6s. a week, and already had a child to support as well, was discouraged by us from adding a wife to the burdens of the weekly budget. Not that we deny there may be plenty of people managing to find a degree of happiness on the same budget or less. But we should not like to bear the responsibility of letting two people risk a marriage that had a ready-made reason for going on the rocks.

Mr. Dewlap's budget was not very promising, but we were sorry for him. Also he was really very nice, so we thought somebody would perhaps pity him and like him enough to marry him.

I had just finished interviewing a mother with a débutante daughter when Mr. Dewlap was announced. He was an oldish man with grizzled hair and a lined face, and he wore an old mackintosh that hung open, and he carried his hat. There were stains on the mackintosh and his hat looked as though he had dropped it in the river when he was

fishing. His expression was rather hopeless, and as I hate to see anyone feeling hopeless about life I prepared to be very sympathetic and see if I could not make him feel the world was a pretty good place after all.

During the interview I discovered that he was 57 and lived in Cumberland, and his income was £150 a year, on which he had to support a little girl. He had been a widower for about nine years and the little girl was living with relations.

His only other assets were a small wayside garage with no electric light and no sanitation. He also had twenty acres of land, a pony and somebody else's cows.

He told us with pride that when he first took the garage it was very 'old-fashioned,' but he had now a petrol tank and a pump. Evidently he had enjoyed installing that pump, and now the excitement of it was over he was feeling lonely. Not that he confessed to being lonely. The reason he gave for wishing to marry was that he liked singing, and he wanted someone to play his accompaniments.

He informed us he had no car but he held a driving licence, and he said he was 'batching it' by himself. We gathered that meant doing all his own cooking, washing and housework, and I think he hoped for a wife who had a car and could do the cooking while he installed another pump.

"I don't suppose anybody will want to marry me," he said pathetically. "It's very lonely there. I don't mind it, but I think most women would object."

"Some women wouldn't mind if they loved the country enough," I replied encouragingly, for I felt terribly sorry for him, "but I do think they might object to there being no sanitation. Couldn't you have that put in while we're looking out some introductions for you?"

But he only shook his head sadly and said he did not think he could.

"It's very pretty," he murmured, as though it would cover a multitude of discomforts all the year round.

In my pity for this lonely figure I put him on the books,

hoping that heaven would send us someone without any sanitary ambition and a mania for housework and gardening. Then he gathered up his crumpled hat and walked out of the room with his mackintosh swinging forlornly from his shoulders on the weight of its bulging pockets.

Chapter V

What it is like to meet somebody through the Marriage Bureau

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO MEET SOMEONE THROUGH THE MARRIAGE Bureau? In case anybody would like to know, and since we cannot describe it ourselves, we have asked a girl on our books to write the next chapter for us.

When I rang her up about the man we had chosen for her to meet, I said:

"He's thirty-six, Church of England, 5 ft. 9 ins. in height—slim—and he's got an income of about £1,000 a year—in the army, stationed in London. He's travelled, fond of riding but not horsey, likes entertaining and people, and he's good-looking and I'm sure you'll like him."

Then I rang up the man.

"She's twenty-eight, slim and fair—has £300 a year of her own—dresses well—attractive, intelligent, and travelled. Fond of entertaining, keen on horses, but looks fragile, not tough—doesn't like winters in England and wouldn't mind living abroad. I think she's just the type of girl you're looking for and you must meet her as soon as possible."

Well there she is and we leave her to continue.

First of all he wrote me a letter:

Dear——

Mary Oliver gave me your address and has asked me to drop you a line.

If you can come up to London, please give me a ring and we can arrange a meeting. I think that it is essential that we should like each other when first we meet and then greater affection may develop.

I do not know whether Mary gave you any particulars about me. I give you some here, but I am afraid that they do not form an attractive array. I am nearly thirty-six, dark and slightly grey hair, blue eyes, athletic figure, ruined by 'child-bearing hips.' I am in the Regular Army and have a good future. I have lived most of my life abroad in India and Egypt and would like to go abroad again.

I am keen on shooting, games, gardens and dancing (but I can't waltz). I am not one of the real 'old school tie' and never could be.

My office phone number is —

My home number before 9 a.m. and after 6 p.m. is in the telephone book (see — hotel).

I shall be very pleased to hear from you if the above details do not deter you!

Yours sincerely,

This was my first introduction as I had only just joined the Marriage Bureau, and I was very shy about meeting him. Consequently I didn't ring up for a week.

I used to pick up the letter and take it to the telephone, and then lose my nerve and put it back in my handbag. I suppose I must have read it nearly a dozen times, because it is intriguing to get a letter out of the blue from someone who has been given your name by the Marriage Bureau.

It meant, I reflected, that we had unconsciously given a description of each other to Mary Oliver as being the type of person we each wanted to marry.

When he met me he might think I was like a bad drawing of that undiscovered girl and be very disappointed. I

might be terribly disappointed in him. And all the week I wondered what he was like.

I had lots of fun with that letter. After I switched the light out at night I used to get up again and fetch the letter and try to shape this man from the sentences.

"I think it is essential that we should like each other when first we meet and then greater affection may develop."

That meant I would be crossed off at once if I wasn't in the running. It also reminded me of the reason we were being introduced, and I wanted to delay meeting him more than ever.

All the same I kept kicking myself over putting it off. It's all nonsense, I told myself. Supposing Mary Oliver didn't run a Marriage Bureau, and she gave a dinner-party and invited us both because she thought we would like each other. I shouldn't feel he was inspecting me in case he wanted to marry me. It just wouldn't enter my head. Why should it bother me now? Anyway the chances of his wanting to marry me would probably be no greater than if he were the guest at the dinner-party. He must realize I would know this and therefore I oughtn't to be shy over meeting him. All the same I did wish he had met me at a large party and picked me out of a room full of people to ask me out, then I shouldn't feel he might be hating every moment of it.

The bit about not being old school tie puzzled me. I know Mary wouldn't have chosen somebody who ate his peas off a knife. But it made me a little alarmed as I thought he must be excusing himself for some odd trait in his behaviour.

Of course, the more I tried to imagine him the more freakish he became in the pictures I conjured up, and that made me put off the meeting longer. Then I saw Mary Oliver and she asked me if I had rung him up yet, so I promised I would.

I collected a lot of courage and picked up the telephone. He was out of his office. I didn't leave a message, and

figure, still reading his newspaper. Then I suddenly remembered I had the wrong coloured hat, so the next time he looked up I started to walk towards him and he hurried forward and greeted me. I explained I hadn't liked to disturb his work just to tell him I had changed my hat.

The moment I met him I forgot all my fears and was as much at ease with him as if we had often met before. I forgot to wonder whether he was disappointed in me and all about the Marriage Bureau and filling in forms. It seemed perfectly natural that we should meet like that.

We hadn't any friends in common, so we couldn't talk about them. The only thing we had in common was the Marriage Bureau. I told him it was the first time I had met anybody through it, and he told me about the others he'd met.

There was one who grumbled, and one who had too much money, and another whom he said he really could have married because she was very nice and attractive and had a lovely figure, but he was unhappy about her dark skin. I think he was afraid she might be faintly Eastern or Red Indian, and he had quite a fixed idea about wanting someone wholly English.

But he didn't criticize any of the ones he described, except the grumbler because he naturally felt it was a bit hard to be taking out somebody who grumbled all evening and had no other form of conversation.

I found he had a very nice smile and an equally nice expression. He was good company and light-hearted, but serious about fundamentals. His marriage and his home he would take very seriously, and his home would be his citadel. One saw he had set himself definite high standards, and he would expect his wife to have values like his own. He wasn't in the least self-important, although he must have achieved a great deal. I had a feeling he would have lots of interesting things to tell if he chose, but he didn't try and build himself up.

He said one reason he had joined the Marriage Bureau

was because he was finding London lonely. It seemed absurd to me that anyone so likeable and friendly should have had to spend Christmas Day and Boxing Day alone. But he'd been abroad for six years and he missed a leave to go on to another job. And then he'd come home to a war-time London, full of people who were too busy worrying about themselves to make new friends. The people he used to know in London were scattered, and he was in the middle of an anxious, inhospitable blacked-out town where neighbours mean nothing even in peace-time. And he found it lonely after India where everyone knew everyone else.

At the same time his career had reached a point which allowed him to marry. And he told me how he'd been going to make a will, like everyone else who was living in the raids, and then he realized he had no one to leave his money to except a brother he didn't like. He did want to feel that the money he had saved and earned so hard would go to someone he was fond of.

We talked about the hypocrisy there was among relations, pretending to like each other just because they were related. I liked hearing him say he didn't like his brother because I never have anything to do with people I don't like either, even if they are a relation.

I felt all his friendships would be very genuine, and when he married he and his wife would have a very happy circle of friends that would make a lot of difference to their marriage.

He said he'd only told one person that he was going to write to the Marriage Bureau, and that was an old aunt. I saw he was devoted to her and respected her advice, and that he often went to her to get her approval on things. There were also old ladies in the hotel where he lived, and I think he was very good to them. He would be just as nice to old ladies as he would to somebody pretty and young and I liked him for it.

There were scraps of things he told me that came up in

phoned again. I missed him, and I missed him in the evening at his hotel. After that I got cold feet and didn't ring up any more and felt quite relieved about it. Anyway I didn't like to ring again.

Of course, as I didn't leave a name he couldn't tell if I had telephoned, but he wrote another letter saying he wondered if it was I who had rung him up, and explaining how I had missed him. "Please ring again!" he finished.

I liked his second letter better than the first, but I didn't keep on reading it. I was glad he had written it and felt encouraged.

This time I rang him up at his hotel, and while he was being paged I nearly took fright and rang off. I almost prayed he wouldn't be in. But he was.

"Thank you for your nice letters," I said politely.

He said something more about being sorry he had missed my calls. Then there was a gap, and I felt as if I were drowning. It was no good, I couldn't act this part at all—playing at an ordinary insignificant social telephone call.

"I'm terrified," I said.

I was just going to ring off on this explanation when he laughed. And because I liked his laugh I felt less frightened.

"I thought you were travelled."

"I am, but I'm still terrified."

And he laughed some more.

"How can we allay your fears?" he asked.

Then he invited me to lunch and asked me where I wanted to go. I didn't like to say 'The Ritz' to a stranger, who might hate the sight of me when he saw me, so I left it to him.

We fixed a day and a place and I was to have a blue hat. But when the day came I was ill in bed with influenza, and with the greatest relief imaginable I rang up and put off the meeting indefinitely.

Of course, I thought about him when I was ill. Now that I had his voice, and the laugh, I had two more pieces to fit into the puzzle picture of what he was like. Some-

times I looked forward to getting better and ringing him up, and sometimes he became such an ogre to me that I rejoiced in not doing anything at all.

But eventually Mary Oliver discovered I was better and encouraged me to ring him up again. This time perhaps he thought I was becoming rather a myth, or maybe he was busy at his office, but he didn't sound so much as though he wanted to see me. Being timid I probably imagined it. So I accepted his invitation to meet him for a drink at six o'clock, and I made it several days ahead so that I could think up an excuse not to go at all.

But when the day came it seemed pretty silly to put it off, though I was still feeling far from well and I didn't want to go looking my worst.

On my way in the taxi I tried to bolster up my courage. Really it was just the same as when friends in England had introduced me to young men abroad and I had to meet them without having seen them before. So why should I be frightened? Still I did wish we'd met at a party and he'd asked me out, instead of this alarming business of the Marriage Bureau being mixed up in it. And I got out of the taxi convinced he was going to be frightful.

I put my weight rather tremulously against the darkened swing doors of the West End restaurant, and they whirled me into the red-carpeted entrance hall. I had been there many times before, but this time I felt as if I had been flung up on the beach in an unknown island.

There was only one figure in army uniform, and he was standing squarely in the middle of the hall, reading an evening newspaper.

He looked up rather covertly over the top of it and then went on reading. It was probably the Major, but I didn't want to recognize him first, so I went over to the fireplace and passed the time by trying to warm myself by it, until I realized it was a synthetic one and had no heat.

I couldn't go on warming myself by a false fire indefinitely, so I peeped out of the shadows at the uniformed

figure, still reading his newspaper. Then I suddenly remembered I had the wrong coloured hat, so the next time he looked up I started to walk towards him and he hurried forward and greeted me. I explained I hadn't liked to disturb his work just to tell him I had changed my hat.

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There were scraps of things he told me that came up in

our conversation, from which I learned more nice things about him. The story of his tin box with all his treasures that got mixed up and sent to Malta by a mistake when he was on his way home was one of them. That made me think that he would cherish his home and notice the flowers and appreciate all his wife did to make it attractive. It was just the way he spoke of the tin box.

I discovered what it was about the 'old school tie' business, for he brought it up himself. It was because he hadn't been to a public school, and I think he had a complex about it and minded. Anyway, he told me all about the school he went to abroad, what they learned and all the sport they had, which was much more varied than usual. I didn't know him well enough to say so, but my reaction, especially after seeing him, was to want to write and congratulate the headmaster. As it was I didn't quite know how to reassure him.

It seemed strange in a way that the first day I met someone he should discuss his financial position and his future with me. But then taking into account that we already knew each other's financial position it was not. Of course we were several moves ahead of an ordinary meeting. But had we not met through the Marriage Bureau, and he talked about such things, it would have probably meant he was either just going to ask me to marry him after knowing me for some time, or else he had already done so and was letting me know his position before I gave my answer. But as it was it didn't mean anything of the kind, as we were merely starting at the other end of the procedure, which might lead to marriage and just as easily might not.

I should think he had planned his life very much to a set pattern, and he didn't want his financial pattern to be upset. He put it very nicely that he was anxious for his wife to have a little money of her own, because it made just that much difference, and for her sake it would be happier for her not to have to ask him for everything.

The only thing that worried me was whether he would

be very upset and reproachful if one did ask for anything. I wasn't sure.

He was just as keen the girl shouldn't have too much money.

"I'd hate to think she felt she had so much money she could get married with the idea of walking off as soon as she wanted."

I saw from this he wanted to be top dog, and I liked him for that too, because nobody wants to marry a man who isn't. That is unless they are a bossy type of young woman. But I felt his would be a very kind, considerate authority, that would rest lightly on his wife's head and not make her rebellious.

He disliked people who were bad-tempered in the early morning. I thought it would look rather odd if I immediately assured him I wasn't. So I laughed and said I didn't see any point in being disagreeable then either.

Sometimes in our conversation I would think: 'Isn't this extraordinary, we're talking about all the things we wouldn't otherwise talk about unless we'd known each other for months.' Yet it didn't seem in the least unnatural that we should be doing it.

Quite soon after we met he asked me to have dinner with him, so at least he felt he would put up with me for another two hours. I had passed grade one or something.

Once he apologized for talking about himself—not that he had been doing it in anything but a very nice, unassuming way—and asked me to tell him about myself. But I avoided this because it would have interrupted, and I was enjoying listening to him. Anyway I'm rather reserved as I don't like women talking about themselves.

My mother used to have a great gift for getting her guests to talk about themselves, and it was something I wanted to be able to do when I had a chance of becoming a hostess. I couldn't imagine any good hostess sitting at the head of the table talking volubly about herself. And as I suppose every man, when he is thinking of marrying, uncon-

sciously tries to picture a girl sitting at the head of his dinner-table, it was one of the things I thought most calculated to make him knock her off the chair again if she talked too much about herself.

I was still recovering from the surprise of being asked out to dinner, when he told me he liked me best of any of the people he'd met. I thought he was only being polite, but he sounded so convincing I wanted to think it was true. Mary said afterwards it would be because he was a very genuine sort of person, and two days later he rang her up and said the same thing to her. I was glad because the fact was I liked him very much too.

When he said he liked me best I didn't immediately think: 'Oh, dear, now I'm in the running as a possible bride. I must try and make a good impression'—as I might have done since we met through a marriage bureau. I merely felt very pleased and intensely relieved that now I could settle down and enjoy myself, knowing that he wasn't putting up with somebody he never would have chosen to take out himself.

We went to a restaurant that was gay without being too crowded and noisy and he was a perfect host. We talked more generally then, like any couple who are dining out after any ordinary meeting.

One of the things I had been afraid of was that he would ask me a lot of questions—or worse still, try and find out why I hadn't been married already, expecting me to divulge my former romances in self-defence, which is an annoying thing I've suffered before.

He told me he didn't want to marry anyone younger than I was because he thought they probably wouldn't know their own mind. And that made me wonder whether years ago he had got engaged to a nineteen-year-old girl out in India, one of the many who are sent out every year by parents who want them to get married quickly. And then, either by a designing parent or her own changeable mind, she had broken it off and married someone else. I thought

this might have happened as Mary Oliver said he didn't want to marry any of the type of girls he met out in India.

Lots of my friends used to think they would be 'on the shelf' at twenty-six or younger, and had married, in a wild rush, the wrong man. I thought of them then and wished they could have heard this man talk about the age of his future wife.

We left the restaurant quite early, partly because I was still tired after being ill, but mostly because I was afraid of outstaying my welcome. When he asked me to dinner he said: "You don't want to be very late, do you?" which I had translated as a tactful way of saying: "I'm working very hard just now, so I don't like keeping very late hours." Though he might have meant it because I had only just got up from influenza.

I was glad he asked to telephone me again on a definite day—because if he'd just said: "May I ring you up some time?" I should have considered myself cancelled. And I was really rather glad I wasn't cancelled because I liked him.

When I was going to sleep that night I suddenly realized that the fact that we met through the Marriage Bureau hadn't spoilt the evening after all. And I knew I should never get in a panic again over seeing anyone else Mary Oliver or Heather Jenner arranged for me to meet.

Chapter VI

Hints for would-be brides—Mannequins and why they come to the Marriage Bureau—Pretty girl who could never get off—People from remote parts of the Empire—Grandee who was too fond of animals

I CHOSE THAT GIRL TO MEET THE MAJOR PRIMARILY BECAUSE they had the same tastes. Although she had put her name down with us she was very detached. She was not a husband hunter, which would have frightened him, and she had the take-me-or-leave-me attitude towards men which I wish all our clients had, and she wouldn't try and create an impression. She was sympathetic, and would say just enough herself to make him enjoy talking to her. And I thought she would have the same values and much the same outlook. He was one of our nicest clients.

She was an easy 'subject' for the Marriage Bureau, but we have many very difficult ones, and some of the prettiest girls are the most difficult of them all.

People often wonder why this or that young woman with apparently everything in her favour—good looks, fortune and luck—remains unmarried, but these overlook the fact that, welcome as such possessions are, they are not the vital spark for attracting a husband.

If I had a daughter I would give her a long list of 'Don'ts' before I allowed her to marry.

Man is a nervous animal, rather like a horse. Frighten him with a lot of noise and fuss and you may not be able to control him. Don't frighten him by gushing, I would warn her. Have no traffic with a sugar-coated tongue. Everyone knows that it is not sincere. And sincerity is one

of the magnetic qualities—not to be confused with intensity, however. Never get intense about things. When you find yourself getting hot all over with enthusiasm it is time to stop. You only alarm people.

Don't wear ultra-smart clothes, I would warn her. Anything flamboyant would frighten the marrying man to death. And don't give him the impression that you are a snob about your family, clothes or surroundings. Snobbishness is very distasteful to a man—except, of course, the man who is a snob himself, and then he may just as easily take exception to it in other people.

Never try to make an impression by being affected. Giving yourself airs, exaggerating your job, position or family background will only alienate the man. He will either be intimidated by you or will laugh at you.

Don't be too intelligent, I would add, when you first meet a man, because even this may be frightening. Show an appreciative interest in other people. Don't let this be artificial, as it's as easy to see through as an empty glass, but really feel it. People will be drawn to you in exact proportion to the interest you show in them.

When you don't understand what is being said, don't sit about with a dentifrice smile, trying to indicate that everything is clear and too too fascinating. He will either think you know more about the subject than he does, which will madden him, or that if it is so easy to understand it can't be very interesting. Worse still, he may think that you are just not listening.

Be honest. Say (with interest): "I don't quite understand. Tell me more about it please." And he will be delighted.

And don't be more than five minutes late for an appointment.

There are many more don'ts I could mention. For instance, one very pretty girl who came to see me seemed, on casual acquaintance, to present me with no difficulties in finding a husband for her. But I was wrong.

She is the kind of girl who tries with all her might to impress a man the moment she meets him. Instead of making him talk, finding out his interests, and making friends gradually by finding things in common, she instantly tries to dazzle the unfortunate man with splendid accounts of herself, her friends, her family, her income, her expensive tastes.

She once told a man who was interested in her that nothing in the world would induce her to go into a sixpenny store. It was so vulgar in her opinion!

From the man's point of view it was so vulgar that he never wanted to see her again.

The worst drawback of all, however, is the inferiority complex. I find that a woman who suffers from this has very little sex appeal. And this applies to men also. To be modest is one thing, and quite attractive, but to persist in thinking of yourself as unattractive and stupid is repellent.

If you really want to be liked give interest, appreciation, understanding and tolerance. Anticipate friendliness for that is the way to make people friendly towards you. And do not assume that if someone is a little quieter than usual, or more brusque, it is because he dislikes you. It is much more likely to be a reflection of some private concern or worry.

One of our difficult clients was a really lovely model girl who posed for photographs. She had the most beautiful skin I have ever come across, besides a pretty face and a perfect figure. Heather and I were always swept away by that complexion, and it interrupted our work because we simply had to stop and talk about it every time she had been in. It was real 'peaches and cream,' and she knew she could be very sparing with make-up.

Of course, the men were in raptures over her directly they saw her, and used to take her out at once to the smartest place they could think of. But there was always trouble, because in spite of her beauty she hadn't enough

poise—at least not enough to last a whole evening. And, I think out of sheer nervousness, she used to say the most frightful things to them.

One poor man who had the most honourable intentions towards her stopped to talk to the taxi-driver to tell him the way very carefully, because he did not think it would be easy to find in the black-out.

The girl was already seated inside, and heard only the low voices in conversation. Suddenly, to the intense embarrassment of both the young man and the taxi-driver, she sprang out like an angry virago and accused the young man of instructing the taxi-driver not to take her straight home.

We heard about it from both the man and the girl, and, of course, she was written off at once by the young man in question.

Yet she was a charming girl to meet, and at heart a very nice one, and we were certain these maladroit things she did and said were only a form of shyness.

Even when we had tried to teach her tact she still had a way of being awkwardly frank at quite the wrong moment. We could not help being amused over the time a young man said to her: "What a pity your teeth aren't quite even." (She had a little chip broken off one of her front teeth.) And she looked him straight in the eye and said: "Yours need scraping."

This sort of frankness, coming from an otherwise apparently gentle but exotic creature, used to bewilder the men she met. Probably they were afraid she would suddenly say the wrong thing to her mother-in-law or their boss at the office, and thereby involve them into some awkward situation.

We almost had to give her up, but she got engaged quite quickly, and married a young planter from Assam, who took her out there after the wedding. But we did have some anxious times with her while we were sending her out with people.

Quite a high percentage of our prettiest girls are mannequins or model girls, and we have had hundreds going through our hands since we started. You might imagine it would be only too easy for these glamorous creatures to find a husband, but they come pouring into the office and say they never meet any eligible men.

I think the men they meet are not the type who want to marry them. They are generally married already and only want a little distraction, and there is no question even of friendship or any real admiration for the girl.

In reality these glittering, sophisticated girls who seem to sweep all before them are immeasurably lonely and have an almost childlike ignorance of their fellow human beings. There is a degree of pathos in them that is all the more poignant because it is in such strange contrast to the picture they present to the world.

I often go and see them at home and see the back of the picture. Instead of an exotic salon and a roomful of admiring faces the girl is in a bed-sitting room where her chief companions are a teapot and an ironing board. She either has to sit up late washing and ironing her underclothes and manicuring her nails, or else she has to get up early to prepare herself for wearing those fifty-guinea models.

There is no time for reading or having any leisured interest, because there is always to-morrow when she must still look the same. Anyway, she is tired because she has been standing all day, and she has dressed and undressed a number of times, and sat patiently beneath stifling incandescent lights while a photographer takes those cool *soignée* pictures that make hundreds of women with a dozen other interests say: "I simply must get some new clothes." Although she may make four times the amount which many a good stenographer is paid she is no better off. For she must buy so many expensive underclothes, shoes and gloves, and if she is posing for cigarettes or outdoor shoes she is expected to have the rest of the outfit ready to hand.

She has no real circle of friends. There are only these

men she does not really like. And her girl friends are limited to the others in the salon who may want to borrow her hats. So in these narrow confines she has little opportunity of learning to understand human beings, and we find we are taking on someone who has to be taught a great deal before she can be a success. This lonely Cinderella is the supposedly 'hard-boiled' girl who is thought to know so much about men. Actually she knows less about them than anyone, for she has usually only met one type of man.

When they first come to us they seem to think that a husband is just a means of being relieved of a considerable amount of financial anxiety. The great advantage about marriage is that they will never have to worry any more about whether they can pay the rent. They want to marry somebody who will have a great deal of money left over after paying the rent so that life will be all the easier for them. At this stage they have not given any particular thought to their side of the bargain and all the million things they will have to do to make their husband a happier man.

We try to show them the true perspective, and in the end they usually marry some nice young man with a comfortable income, and learn all about real affection.

Another common difficulty we find is what we call 'suburban respectability'. This means flaunting a 'strict' landlady or some form of chaperone with unnecessary pointedness, and generally embarrassing any man who comes along by assuming his intentions are strictly dishonourable.

Mannequins and show girls nearly always want to marry men from far-off parts of the Empire, and luckily for us the men from these places are all attracted by them and want them as brides. You might think they would look for stout Scottish lassies or someone more able to stand up against the buffeting of climatic extremes, but they don't. They come home and sweep these girls off their feet, and so far these marriages have been very successful.

Many of our men come from all parts of India and Africa,

including Nigeria, Morocco and the Gold Coast, besides Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ceylon, Palestine, China, the Straits Settlements and Lisbon, Gibraltar and Singapore.

In a way Heather and I get the biggest thrill of all from meeting people in all these distant places. To begin with they are lonely. What we can do for them means more to them than to a man who is living in England and has plenty of friends. And the girl who goes out to them has perhaps found her own life narrow and colourless. She is someone who has longed to travel, and yet never dreamed she would ever have the opportunity. She is lonely too in a way, and sometimes she is overworked as well. What she needs most of all is a really violent change and something terribly exciting and new in her life. In other words, she needs romance in its broader sense.

So when we bring off one of these matches and get, as we so often do, a letter saying how happy they are, we feel we have done something rather important and worth while—even though the arranging of it has been a big responsibility.

It may be several times in one week that we open the post to find something like this:

. . . I am now Assistant Manager in the — Oil Co., and am responsible to the General Manager for all oil field operations. I live at the Oil Field, and have a large delightful bungalow, beautiful garden and enjoy entertaining the many visitors, including Governors, Commissioners, etc., who visit this Field. . . .

I motor a lot, having a car given to me by the Company as well as my own car and driver. . . . In the summer one gets up to the hill station of . . . a very cheery station in the season. From my house it is only two and a half hours' journey and one gets up to 7,000 feet. In the winter we ski there. . . .

There are quite a number of Europeans and Americans on my staff and they have wives. . . . I

am very easy to get along with, and am very light-hearted, enjoying life and am not set in my ways. Financially, on generally accepted standards, I am well off and hope to retire in comfort, say ten years hence.

Well, there is Opportunity for some deserving girl—waiting on our desk in Bond Street. We have put him in touch with several girls and at the moment he is writing to them. And as there is no chance of his coming to England while the war is on he is probably going to choose his bride by her letters and photograph.

So far we have no indication of whom it will be, and we are still sending fresh entries for the field. When he feels very hopeful about anyone we are to arrange for her to meet his mother in England first.

Next a policeman from Southern Rhodesia pops out of the post-bag, telling us 'when reaching my age, twenty-six, a fellow thinks of settling down. I am permitted to marry in another year's time according to Police Regulations.'

Then there is a shipping man in China, and a young man in Singapore, who was counting on his next leave to come to England and look for a wife, but now the war has prevented his getting over. He has an income of £975 a year and his recreations are tennis, golf, dancing, bridge and racing.

A twenty-nine-year-old engineer in India also has a good income and says his pastimes are *big-game hunting* (underlined), oil painting, photography and motor cycling. And he says he likes to be jovial and enjoys talking politics. I think he is disappointed about his leave, too, and all those English girls he was going to come and meet over here. Anyway, he asks us to hurry up and find him someone. He ends his letter: 'To say I would be grateful will be to express my feelings very feebly.'

One of our remote clients is a young man who lives on the Seychelles Islands, where he has his own whaling boat

and crew and spends all his time catching whales. He told us he makes about £1,500 a year, as every part of a whale can be sold.

He didn't try and gild his island life, and when he asked us to find him a wife he said she must be 'one who likes heat, whales, flies and natives.' But adds that he has a very nice little bungalow and the island is lovely.

Heather and I have taken rather a fancy to him, and think from his letters he must be very nice.

When war broke out he had just become so interested in one of our nicest girl clients (she has the loveliest eyelashes we have ever come across) that he was coming home to meet her. So far the war has held up his return, but now we hear there is still a chance of his being able to get here quite soon. Meanwhile (for the interest is mutual) she has gone into one of the services, and says she does not want to meet anyone else till he comes home.

Of course, all our distant applications are not so promising as the ones I have just mentioned.

We had a vast correspondence from an old man in the backwoods of Australia whose name we never put on the books.

Letters, some of them in verse, came pouring in, together with a quantity of snapshots. Quite incidentally he did want to find a wife, but only because he thought she might be induced to buy him a caravan, in which he planned to roam the world looking for buried treasure, with a lion cub as a pet. He also proposed to take frequent sun-baths in the nude en route. Sometimes he suggested Heather and I should buy him the caravan, and it became more expensive each time he wrote.

As far as we were concerned he was lonely, and we were glad he applied to us, but we did wish (for we have a very busy office) that he didn't have to hark back to 1901, and even give us his views on criminology and pedestrians' bad manners.

We were alarmed when we had a letter in Hungarian

(which is not on our language list), but then were relieved to find a translation was sent with it.

This letter came before the war, and it was from a Hungarian doctor who said he wanted to 'sail into the happy haven of marriage,' preferably with a Hungarian, but he did not really mind what nationality she was.

Having begun his letter with such poetic romanticism, he then became extremely calculating. Evidently the patients were not queueing up in sufficient numbers, and he wanted his wife to be 'a very cheery, domesticated lady, into whose business, shop, factory or agricultural estate I would enter as her collaborating partner in addition to my professional work.'

After which starkly practical statement the gentleman of the Blue Danube kissed our hands in farewell and asked us to let him know if we agreed to attend to his case.

Sometimes young men on leave from the East write to us from the boat on the way home. Like this one, who said :

I am coming home from India for a short holiday, and if you can introduce me to a good-looking and well-to-do young lady or Society lady, I shall be glad if you will let me know c/o——

He did not trouble to tell us much about himself, except to assure us airily that he belonged to 'all important clubs.'

One letter that came from Tunis made us very interested in the man who wrote it, simply because he is the only person who has been candid enough to write and tell us he is bad-tempered.

I am not young (61), he said, not rich (income rarely up to £200), not good-tempered. I live out here partly because I like the sun, partly because it is the cheapest place I know of to live in, partly because I don't like going to afternoon teas and being polite. . . .

If would-be clients are living in other countries their letters to us are, of course, extremely important, as we need

to get as clear a picture of them as possible before we choose out people for them to write to. So many times we either get scrappy letters which tell us next to nothing, or else numerous pages which also tell us nothing except about matters quite beside the point, and which we find exasperating to have to read.

The most helpful, practical business-like letters of all seem to come from Americans. Here are extracts from a letter that came from New Jersey a year before the war:

I am an engineer, mechanical, having worked both in the domestic field and in Canada and Europe as well, and am divorced, without children. Married in—in 1929, lived together a year and wife skipped. I divorced her upon my return from Europe. . . . Am of English ancestors. . . . 46 years old, 5ft. 11ins. tall, 220 lbs., fine health, blue eyes, grey hair, comfortably fixed as to money and property. I work a five-day week, and have 26 days' vacation with pay a year, and 15 days' sick leave, ditto a year—a real decent job. Am an alumnus of Yale University, class of 19—. Own a car, of course.

. . . I have been too busy tending to business since I came home from Europe to look around much for a wife. It is hard to find one interested in anybody over forty years old to boot—at any rate here. Have thought seriously of travelling to England next summer to look for a wife, say 22 to 32 years old, non-Catholic, and not a widow, one who is a homebody. Would like a fairly attractive personality, at least 'easy to look at.' Also one who really wants to have one or two children, as I love kids. Ditto a good dog. Like music deeply, also art.

. . . I suppose there is one chance in a hundred that you will get this, or if so, even consider it a moment, being a 'foreigner?' so if the Dead Letter Office reads this far I hope they will not bother to return this letter to me—I would get a laugh from the small-town busi-

bodies at the Post Office here if they saw the returned letter. Nevertheless, I want a good wife, and like English girls, what I have seen of them in Canada. . . . I could come over to meet them if we proved congenial by mail to start with. Would be glad to contribute to any cost for the service you might care to ask.

That is just the type of letter we like to have, informative, brief and to the point and easy to read. This American was engaged—by post—quite soon after he came on the books, to a very attractive young English games mistress.

Before the war we always had at least thirty American men on our books at a time, and they were very much in demand. Most of them were business men, aged about forty or a little over. They were generally over on a short business trip on which they might not have time or opportunity to meet many people. And as they wanted to take back an English wife they asked us to help them find one.

Americans carry out their courtship very well, and with much more verve and acumen than the average Englishman. After all, it is the time when a girl does like the man to make a really big effort to please her—not, like so many Englishmen, by telling her what a little god he is in some place she has never even seen—but by doing things that have given him some amount of trouble and thought. And Americans make an art of this when, in their own term, they are trying to 'rush' a girl.

Flowers, letters, long-distance telephone calls—he does something every day and really goes to it with energy. He does not leave her, apparently forgotten, for two or three weeks because he has been too busy to call her up. And when he is married he still makes a big fuss of her. It may not be quite so hectic a fuss, but at least he doesn't regard her quite like the old mare put safely in her stable. Anyway, when he felt that way about her there would probably be a divorce, because in America tolerance isn't allowed to reach the state of hypocrisy. They say: "This

doesn't work, let's wash it up," and perhaps it is often better that way than dragging on either in a state of apathy or even dislike.

We also found there was a great demand for the American girls who came on our books. Most of them were about twenty-four to thirty-two, and very slick and smart and easy to talk to. They usually had an adequate amount of money of their own, and were all anxious to marry Englishmen. And they wanted to live in the country in an old English country house. (We cannot help wondering how they are liking some of those old country houses in winter.)

When war broke out we still had some American girls on our list, so we put them in touch with Englishmen in other parts of the Empire. They were very pleased with that idea, and several of them took trips to India and got married to the young men we introduced to them.

The American men especially used to love their first meeting through the Marriage Bureau. They usually appeared with a red carnation in their buttonhole to identify themselves, and regarded the whole procedure as a pretty cute idea.

As clients we found the American girls charming and likeable. They were always frank and interesting about the men they met, and were very intelligent in discussing anybody's character. In many ways we found them a great help to us.

We also have several foreign clients who have lived in this country for many years. We have reason to remember the South American who had a large, very richly appointed mansion in Scotland.

He was about fifty, fair, and good-looking except for his nose, which was so big he looked rather like Mr. Punch. He was well turned out, although his shoes and his finger nails shone just a little too much.

His wife had died some years ago, and he wanted to marry somebody very smart, who would entertain his guests well. One of the chief things he stipulated was that she

should be fond of animals. That was easy to find, since so many of our clients put in their forms that they are fond of animals as one of their assets. 'Fond of animals and children' occurs frequently in the letters we get, especially from women.

We picked out a Mrs. Dale for him, who was extremely smart, a little over forty and quite convinced she would enjoy his pets.

It looked like an easy match, and when he invited her for the week-end we pictured her making a very decorative appearance at the mansion, walking through the trees in the garden with a couple of handsome Borzoi hounds. The South American would be grinning with delight from one ear to the other, and very soon she would be installed as the Marquise.

A few mornings later she was announced at the office, and Heather and I nodded gaily at each other before she came in. We both looked up, expecting to see a radiant face and prepared for a flow of enthusiastic chatter.

But Mrs. Dale was not radiant. She was incalculably annoyed.

"Apes!" she said fiercely, throwing her handbag down on my desk and sitting down in the chair without waiting to be asked. "He keeps 'Apes.' There were five of them, great big ones, curled up in baskets in front of the drawing-room fire. What's more, one of them was ill. Have you ever seen a sick ape?" she asked with a genuine shudder, as she recalled the spectacle.

We blinked at her in some confusion, and I murmured apologetically that we had no idea he had such unexpected pets.

Heather rose to the occasion by saying: "Oh, he's probably only keeping them there till he presents them to the Zoo."

"No," said Mrs. Dale dramatically, "they live there. And you won't get them out. He adores them."

"Well, how did you like him?" I asked as brightly as I could after the shock of the apes.

"Oh, I hated him at sight. Couldn't stand him the moment I saw him."

As she said this Heather was already doing some quick thinking and looking out another introduction for her.

Shortly afterwards the South American himself came in to see us—also looking highly aggravated over something. We concluded Mrs. Dale had said something very rude about his apes, but as we thought it best to look as though we suspected nothing at all we asked him how he liked her.

"I took an *instant* dislike to her." He waved his polished finger-nails as though to eradicate her name from an invisible wall. "The very moment I saw her, I said, 'Not for me.' She is dreadful. And I tell you" (his voice rose to a higher note in his anger), "she has only one breast."

After this extraordinary announcement he waited for us to explain the phenomenon of Mrs. Dale's anatomy. But we were trying to reconcile his knowledge of it with the instant mutual dislike directly they met.

Then we suddenly realized there was an awkward silence and we still had to soothe him down.

"Here's quite a young widow whom I am sure you would like," announced Heather with remarkable poise, while she wrote down a name out of the files. "She's done a good deal of entertaining when she was married before, and she's got a really lovely figure. We've seen a photograph of her in a bathing dress."

Eventually he seemed placated and bowed his way out of the office. But we still had to recover from the shock of the apes.

"Perhaps Mrs. Dale was making it up about them," I suggested hopefully. "And anyway we may find somebody who thinks its rather interesting of him to keep apes in the drawing-room."

We decided not to warn anybody first about the apes

as then they might refuse to go down and meet our South American client. Instead we would merely hope they would be so entranced with the mansion that the little item of the pets would not matter. But they all came back shuddering, and said they could not marry anybody who expected them to share the domestic hearth with apes.

Chapter VII

Girl who wanted to meet the attractive young man who lived up the road—Some statistics about clients—Wealthy man who was mean—The only marriage that nearly foundered—Couple who always quarrelled and yet got married—Popular attributes—Women who think every man has fallen for them

SHE WAS YOUNG AND PRETTY, AND SHE CAME IN SMILING. A slim, brown-haired girl with large grey eyes and quietly expensive clothes. We liked her before she even spoke to us. After some of the depressing figures that had drifted through our office that morning, it was like spring sunshine to see her.

I offered her a chair and watched her take off her gloves, and thought how every time she took them off somebody must have fallen in love with her. She had very small transparent little hands with fingers like spun glass, so fragile and beautiful one wondered how she even did up her dress.

“I’ve just heard about you, and I thought perhaps you could help me,” she said hesitatingly. “You see, I want to meet somebody just in case they might happen to like me.”

We told her in all sincerity that we could introduce her to a number of young men who we felt pretty certain would like her.

“Oh, no,” she said quickly. “I don’t want you to do that.”

We looked at her in perplexity and wondered why she had come to the office.

Then she unfolded the story of a young man who lived

only three doors away in the same road in London. Good-looking, successful, owning his own house where he lived alone, and above all the most attractive personality.

For three years she had passed him in the road, watched him playing polo, and seen him at race meetings in the country. Before she went to bed she had gazed at the trees showing over the top of his garden wall and said: "One day perhaps I shall meet him." And in the morning she had looked round her curtain at the same trees in the morning light and thought: 'It might easily happen next week—or to-day.' But it never did, because she never met anyone who knew him.

It was one of the vagaries of chance that they should belong to much the same set of people and live almost next door and yet never meet—it happens so often in London—and one of the rules of convention that they should have to wait for an introduction that was not even in sight.

No matter with whom she was going out in the evening she would still hope he might pass when she was crossing the pavement—because that would be much more interesting than the dinner, the theatre and the dancing with the young man who was taking her out.

"Perhaps he's just as anxious to meet you," I suggested, as being the most sympathetic comment I could make.

"I don't know really," she said distantly. "Anyway, I always look away, just because, you see, I want to get to know him so terribly badly."

That I appreciated, and I nodded understandingly.

"I know one couple," I said, for I was suddenly reminded of them, "who were neighbours for a long time, just like you are. And they both wanted to meet each other very badly and didn't know it. They lived next door to each other, and one day a tree fell down from her garden into his and he had to go and see her parents to complain about it. So they met, and soon after they got engaged and were married. It was all very romantic."

The grey eyes were wide with interest while she drank in the story.

"I'm afraid our trees are terribly firm," she said a little sadly.

"The point is," she went on, "can you possibly—I know it's asking a lot—but could you—somehow, I mean could you arrange for us to meet—I don't know how? But it would be very nice of you."

And she smiled and settled more happily in her chair, as though she had unloaded herself of a vast burden and was prepared to be swept along in any current of consequences.

"What's his name?" I asked.

She told me.

"Well, to start with, he's not on the books, so I don't see what we can do."

But she only smiled trustfully, and then I had a sudden impulse to try out some mad scheme and see how it would work.

"I'll try," I promised. "It's quite outside our province, but we'll do what we can. Only don't count on anything because I may not get any bright ideas about it."

And she drew on her gloves over those lovely little hands and thanked us warmly before she went out.

"Mary, you're crazy," said Heather laughingly. "What *are* you going to do?"

"I'll have to do something," I said. "Wasn't she sweet?"

That evening I went home to my flat and looked up his name in the telephone book. I stared at it for a considerable time while I tried to work up my confidence. Then I cleared my throat several times and started talking out loud to myself to see how my voice sounded, which is a trick I used to have before making an important telephone call when I was seventeen and very shy.

He was in, so I had to go through with it.

"Is that Sir——?"

A voice said he was speaking.

"Oh, this is Mary Oliver here. I run the Marriage Bureau. I'm so sorry I was out when you telephoned this morning to invite me to lunch with you to-morrow. And I just rang up to say I shall be so pleased to come. Only could you make it half-past one at the Berkeley instead of one o'clock."

"Marriage Bureau—I think there must be some mistake."

Luckily he sounded mildly amused—not annoyed.

"A mistake," I murmured in a mystified voice, "but that was the message I got. Heavens!" I added, as though suddenly seeing daylight, "one of our friends, either yours or mine, must have been playing a joke on us. I'm so sorry. How dreadfully embarrassing."

He laughed, really very engagingly, and said:

"We'll have to get to the bottom of this. Anyway, let's have our lunch, even if they *have* played a trick on us."

I accepted, and rang off in the most jubilant mood imaginable. But then as I wandered back to the fireplace I reminded myself that this was only the beginning of the story, and we still had to persuade him to register with us.

When I met him I could quite understand why this girl was so stirred by him even without knowing him. He was a delightful, easy, attractive personality, and in spite of the delicate mission it entailed I did enjoy my lunch.

I do not quite know how I did it, but when we were having coffee (I know it was getting perilously near the end of our meeting) I persuaded him to join the Marriage Bureau—chiefly, I think, because he simply did not believe it was true that Heather and I were running it, and that we had so many clients. He was very interested in the whole business.

When he joined, the first person I introduced him to was the girl three doors away.

The end of that story was a happy marriage, and since then we have had several other clients who have come into the office and said there is someone they have been longing

to meet, and asking if we could do something about it. I often wish secretly that someone could do it for me.

Another case of this kind did not end so romantically. She was a woman of about forty-five, who wanted to meet a man who lived in the same block of flats in Brighton. In her case we were not particularly astonished that he passed her by because she was not very attractive and had a forbiddingly square jaw.

Frankly we were surprised she had not spoken to him, for she looked the type who would. We gathered she went up and down in the lift with him a good deal, and suspected she took a multiplied number of lift rides in the hope of seeing him. She seemed to know a tremendous lot about him, so whether she tipped the porter to give her tit-bits, or went through his mail, we do not know, but she took up hours of our time telling us about him.

We got him to join the Marriage Bureau by sending him a circular, deciding that if he were too nice to suffer the fate of meeting her, we would say we could not put him on the books, and not take her on either. But as it turned out he was far from distracting, so we thought they might meet.

Just as we had arranged the first meeting she came in and said she did not want to know him after all, because she had discovered he drank. In the end we refunded their money and told both of them we had no one to suit them.

The Baronet and the girl who lived three doors away were married quite quickly, about three months from the day they met. Most of the engagements last from one to six months, but the most whirlwind of all the romances was a young Austrian girl who came to us soon after we first opened the office. Her father was a big shoe manufacturer in Austria, and she was at a convent in England learning music.

"I am so simple," she kept on saying when she arrived for an interview, but she got engaged the first week and came in looking radiant. Three weeks later she was married.

Our advice to clients when they ask us should they marry

so-and-so is: "Don't do it quickly—no sensible man will mind your wanting to think it over." This is partly because we feel that if they have to come and ask somebody else about it they cannot be very certain of their own mind.

Outside people, when they first hear of the Marriage Bureau, are so apt to imagine it as the last resort of the hopelessly shelved individuals who have left their youth a long way behind them. But the majority of our clients, both men and women, are under forty.

We find most men want children, and most of the younger girls want them, but the girls over thirty would rather be without them. A lot of widows about forty want to meet widowers with small children, and as we always have a number of widowers looking round for somebody 'settled' to mother their family, this fits in very well.

Last year we had many retired widowers on our hands and even more independent widows, but fortunately the more attractive of the younger widows were much in demand with eligible bachelors, so things evened out fairly well.

Nobody seems to want to marry a dentist (luckily we only had a few to deal with last year), but doctors are popular, and we have at least sixty on the books at once. Women usually refuse even to meet the dentists. If they did they might like them, as we have had some very nice dentist clients who were also very good-looking. But directly they hear the word 'dentist' they say: "A dentist—no, I shouldn't like to marry one. Can't you introduce me to somebody else?"

If they do not mind doctors, why mind dentists? We can think of no explanation.

Bank clerks are also a little difficult because they have so little money, though it is at least steady and certain. So we have to send them girls who are prepared for a long courtship, preferably ones who are working in an office themselves. We took on about sixty bank clerks last year, for instance, and half as many accountants. The latter were a

much better proposition, as some of them were young accountants with a partnership in the offing.

Unless he is rich and can travel and supply a good deal of active diversion, a retired bachelor is not a popular idea with the average girl or young woman. They nearly all say: "I'd hate a man knocking about the house all day."

The point, of course, being that they are unhappy about him seeing the house with its hair down in the throes of the morning cleaning. It is too much like having a stranger in the bathroom. Also, even if a man has got a pretty mundane job there is always some chance of promotion and a magical future on which to build a wonderful castle of dreams.

We have a continuous supply of retired bachelors on the books, and we should like to advise most of them to take jobs.

Civil servants seem to flock into our office. But we get few artists or musicians.

A good many men say they want a wife who is musical and can play or sing to them, but the only man who specified that he wanted to marry a professional musician (she had to be a violinist) was nearly stone deaf. He was also very keen on dancing and had a wooden leg.

We had thirty-five lawyers that year, and four M.P.s. And out of the many men and women who wrote to us from abroad fifty of the men were tea-planters.

Business men are generally aged from forty-five to fifty-five, and we have a number from the North who are self-made men and want somebody decorative to sit at the end of their table. The majority of the business men we had on the books last year owned their own firms.

What might surprise some people is that out of the fifty odd business women who were with us at the same time, a large number were big business directors with their own firms.

They were not very easy to find husbands for as they had left the question of marriage till too late. There was one, for instance, who was head of a big wholesale clothing

manufacturer's in Lancashire. She was only forty-five, extremely nice, very broad and heavy, neat and quite nice-looking. The only way to describe her, if one can do it without defacing her charm, which was bountiful, was that she was the sort of person any jealous wife would want her husband to have as his secretary. I think she was outstandingly capable, and she must have been popular with her work-people or she would not have been able to build up a successful business as she had. But there had been no other side to her at all. For all the best years of her-life she had been solely in love with her business, steeped in it, giving her best to it and not wanting anything else.

Now the brother she lived with had died suddenly and she found she was lonely. Mentally she began to look out of the window and see what she had missed. She herself had a business with a remarkable six-figure turnover, of which she was in complete control. Her income was huge for a working woman, and her savings established her for life. She could retire in clover if she wished, but what then? It was like being given a brand new motor car and not knowing where to go.

"I've been lonely since my brother died," was the only explanation she gave for coming to us, but we saw the whole story when she told us about the wholesale clothing firm.

For a moment I thought of not letting her register. Then I reflected that if we did not take her on she would probably fall into the hands of a fortune hunter, or somebody who wanted an easy berth in her business. And so in the hope of averting that tragedy we decided to take a chance.

Another idea outside people have when they first hear about the Marriage Bureau is that we are only patronized by working-class people. I do not know why they immediately jump to this conclusion. In actual fact, out of our register only approximately fifteen per cent of our clients are working-class men and women.

This is because the working class have more facilities for meeting each other; there is less convention and neighbours

are meant to gossip with. There are the Saturday 'hops,' when a man can dance with a girl and make friends with her without waiting to be introduced, and it is not odd to speak to somebody who travels on the same bus every day.

Several workmen have tipped me after I have arranged their marriage for them. I found it a little embarrassing the first time one put two shillings on my desk, but then I realized he meant it in just the same way as the grander clients who send me bouquets of flowers. "Please buy something for yourself," he said, as he put the coin on my blotting pad. And I thanked him warmly and said I would get a new supply of cigarettes.

We try as far as possible to keep the numbers almost even, and this means we have a long waiting list of women. Directly an extra batch of men come along we add some more women from the waiting list.

The average income of our men clients is £600 to £700 a year. A third of the men have an income of four figures, and the highest income for a man so far is £15,000 a year.

You might think some women would put up with many disadvantages for an income as high as that. But one man who fell into this category was refused a great many times.

He was an industrial widower who had seven children and lived in the North in a large gloomy mansion with red plush sofas, and pictures of his first wife in embossed silver frames hung all round the house.

The trouble was he used to take our women clients to dine somewhere garish and cheap, and then drag them out into the cold and say: "Now let's get on a bus"—which from somebody with £15,000 a year struck rather harshly on feminine ears.

We used to warn the women we introduced him to that he had seven children, but directly they heard about his income they hastened to assure us they adored them and that it would be such fun to have a large ready-made family.

Few of them got as far as seeing the children or the red

plush sofas, because the bus ride shook them so badly they never wanted to see him again.

Some men ask us not to tell the girl what their income is until they know her pretty well, so when she asks us about it we have to say vaguely that it is 'adequate.'

We did have one, an Australian sheep heiress, among our clients, and nobody, not even ourselves, knew anything about it until a month after the wedding.

I remember her coming into the office. She was a quiet, mouse-like little thing about twenty-six, with a flat expression and not at all smart. And she wore cotton gloves that were all bitten at the fingers.

"I've got a little allowance of my own," she said. "And I want to marry a man who lives quietly in the country. I'd like him to have about £400 or £500 a year, not more."

We found an educated young farmer for her in Somerset and they were married. Like most English farms his was barely holding its own, but he said she did not seem to worry when he told her they easily might become poverty-stricken later on.

So they settled down very happily, until a month afterwards when we received a bombshell in the form of a furiously angry letter from the young man.

Heather and I read it in turns several times over, for we could hardly believe our eyes. Apparently her 'little allowance' was £8,000 a year, while any day in the future she would inherit over a million. And she had never said anything about it until she told him casually one day after the wedding.

But the worst shock to us was the way the husband had taken the news of her wealth. We gathered there was a pretty big row going on, and one of our happiest marriages was in danger of breaking up.

Of course, we wrote at once and explained that this was the first we knew about it ourselves, and that we did not see why it should make any difference to their happiness since her tastes were obviously just as simple as his.

I believe the storm lasted for weeks, and we were very glad when she wrote one day and told us they had made it up.

That, so far, is the only occasion we have heard of when one of 'our' marriages seemed in danger of going on the rocks.

The marriage we have always expected to founder seems to be surviving quite harmoniously. This was a couple who always quarrelled every time they went out together but yet got married in the end.

The man was a very intelligent, amusing, but very self-opinionated doctor, who adored arguing. A friendly argument was no good to him. He simply had to take his gloves off over it, and the only person who bothered to stand up to him was this girl whom he eventually married.

She was not a particularly spirited girl. But she used to offer a stodgy resistance to his arguments that at least kept them well kindled, which was what he liked—until she would get fed up with it and hurl at him any retort that came into her head, so that it always developed into a real row.

Then he used to come into the office and say he was never taking her out again. Altogether he had thirty-six introductions (the record number for a man), but nobody else could be bothered to oppose him, and each time he went back to her, which meant, of course, a fresh quarrel.

For two pins he could have started an argument with Heather and me, but we were aware of that and were very careful not to let him begin.

Our highest income for a girl up to date is £10,000 a year, while the average is £200 or £300. A great many have a dress allowance of £150. Nearly all the men say they want their wife to have a little money of her own, but most of them are anxious it should be very much smaller than their own income. Working men do not seem to mind if their wife has no money at all as long as she is domesticated.

Each client has a number, and we keep a large black book in the office containing the names of all our clients.

Beside their names are the 'numbers' of the people they have met. Then by simply looking up their names we can see whom they have already been introduced to, and make sure we do not give them the same introduction twice over. We happen to have a divorced husband and wife who are both on the books, and neither of them know the other has registered with us. Our black book helps us not to make the awful mistake of arranging to send them out together.

At the moment a schoolmistress holds the record for women in the number of introductions, and she has had thirty-five. But in her case very few of the introductions have meant a meeting. I think mainly because she writes to the men on school exercise paper and that frightens them.

If anyone asked me what attributes most men want in a woman I should say three of the chief things they state are that she should be healthy, adaptable and have a sense of humour. Nearly all of them want her to have a slim figure and lovely legs. They put the figure before a pretty face and it has to be a very beautiful face indeed that can carry off a pair of bulky legs. There are occasional variations like 'plump but not fat,' and one man specially stated he wanted his wife to have 'a plump bosom and lovely legs.'

Most men want to marry girls with a fair skin. They do not mind so much about the colour of her hair as long as she has a fair complexion. Voices matter to them enormously, and so do pretty, well-kept hands.

'Intelligent, vivacious and well-read,' is a phrase that often appears in the forms. Many of them lay great stress on sincerity and numbers ask for her to be fond of a home and children.

'A good conversationalist' is another qualification that appears pretty often, but they nearly all add that this does not mean somebody who never stops talking. 'A good conversationalist (not dumb and not a gas-bag),' was how one young Army officer defined it.

Men dislike loud voices. I had several complaints about a girl who seemed to think the whole restaurant must want

to hear all she had to say. For instance, I sent her out with a very nice Naval officer who said: "She would talk about the wrong things in the wrong place. You know—talking loudly about workmen and criticizing their families while we were in the tube, and then discussing all sorts of things at the restaurant where most people looked round at us. I wished I could just disappear!"

After this Heather and I had two alternatives. We felt we either had to send her out with a series of rather deaf clients if we could find them, or else we should have to tell her, and see if we could get her out of it.

We often take on the task of telling people their faults, which, of course, has to be done very tactfully and well wrapped up in praise for their virtues. But half the time we do not have to bother because the clients frequently do not hesitate to tell each other their failings. There seems to be a good deal of plain speaking between them, and all done in a very friendly manner.

The women usually want a husband with a sense of humour. They don't seem to mind whether he is fair or dark, though a good many take exception to red hair. And most of them want him to be athletic more than good-looking. They want him to be sincere, unselfish, generous and sympathetic. On the whole they have a much less clear picture in their mind of the type of person they want to marry than the men have.

Once we heard from a man who said he did not mind if his wife was a cripple.

"What I want is a wife," he said, "and I don't care what her past has been, what her looks are, not even if she is a cripple, provided she is really affectionate and a real homely girl who will think more of her man and his company than going about."

We often get asked by our women clients what men like them to wear, though generally what all the men write down as to their taste in feminine clothes is 'smart but not ostentatious.'

I remember a girl asking me what she should wear when she was going to meet a man for the second time and he was taking her out to a big cocktail party. So I wrote back to her:

I really think a plain black woollen like the one you were wearing the other day, is quite suitable for the cocktail party, and not many men care for loud colours, so you are quite safe in black. It does mean a lot if a man approves of your clothes when he takes you out, and I only wish that all our clients were as wise as you are.

Now and then we try and smarten up our men clients, and we made a very earnest endeavour with Bert, an East End van-driver, aged about thirty-four.

We began by advising him to put on his best suit, instead of calling on the girls in his uniform, but forbore to point out the oil-stains that rendered it so unattractive. This turned out to be a bad suggestion, because his best suit must have been put away somewhere damp for a great length of time and it had not occurred to him to have it pressed. At any rate we got the idea out of his head that it was effeminate to have clean finger-nails.

He was keen to marry somebody 'intellectual,' though we never quite knew what this meant. And after he met anybody he used to come into the office and tell us they were 'too stupid.' I think he felt a little awed by his own intellect ever since the day he had a letter printed in the popular press.

His chief hobby was going to first-nights, which he said he only did to study the people. And one time he came to the office he treated us to a loud socialistic tirade on the price of a society woman's frock being enough to feed a family for a week. We suggested that if he included her jewels as well it might keep three families for six weeks—hoping, of course, to cut him short, so that we could get on with our work, but he was on his favourite war-horse and it was not so easy.

Nobody would believe the things we have to listen to in the course of a day's interviewing. Diseases are a pet topic,

and we often have to endure the demise of somebody's late lamented husband in all its lingering stages. We must listen politely because we can hardly dismiss the subject in a breezy way and say: "Well, anyway, he's dead now. Let's hear what sort of a man you want to marry next."

I even had an afternoon session with one woman hearing all about the laying out of a corpse, which I did not find quite the best form of entertainment after a delectable lunch.

But that was a cheerful interview compared with a woman who arrived in such floods of tears I thought someone must have died that morning.

"Come in and sit down," I said kindly, when she appeared round the door, hoping fervently that the tears had nothing to do with one of our clients.

Then I waited patiently while she dabbed her eyes with a soaking handkerchief.

"I can't marry him," she said in a voice cracked with sobs.

As she spoke more tears welled up in the swollen eyelids.

"Who?" I said, wondering if I ought to part with my clean handkerchief.

She told me, and I remembered putting her in touch with a Government official in Somerset. I had not expected alarming developments of any kind from him, and thought he would be slow over his courtship as he seemed so staid. All I could imagine from her tears was that he had proposed to her and then she had unearthed some unknown vice, which again surprised me as I thought he was eminently worthy.

When she had dealt with the fresh tears and prevented them running down her cheek she began to explain:

"You see, he can't leave Somerset because of his job, and my little girl is at school near London, and I should never see her unless I put her in a new school in Somerset—and then she mightn't be happy."

This seemed such an anti-climax to anything I had expected that I couldn't find anything to say.

"It wouldn't work, would it?" she added dramatically, as though he had invited her to settle down in a harem.

Meanwhile I was thinking how quickly he must have made his proposal, for as far as I could recollect she had only just met him.

"When did he ask you to marry him?" I asked, trying hard not to sound too curious about it.

"He hasn't yet," she said.

And then it seemed as if my voice were a distant person answering, for I was so dumbfounded.

"Then I shouldn't worry," I replied, wondering whether she would calm down or get more distraught if I explained to her that just because she met him through the Marriage Bureau it did not mean he was bound to propose to her.

It always astonished Heather and me how many women do think all the men are sure to propose to them. Plenty of them come in saying: "I couldn't marry Mr. — because . . ." though not, I am glad to say, with the same extravagant degree of emotion as this woman did.

Then if we say to them: "Has he asked you to marry him?" they look at us as if we are either mad or insulting.

Sometimes we find it necessary to explain that if they meet a man through the Marriage Bureau it doesn't mean they are half-way up the aisle the first time he takes them out. And that if they have this illusion he will probably sense it and disappear in considerable trepidation.

But we only bother to do this when we think they are letting the man see they have almost put up the banns, and then of course we do it in their own interests. Otherwise we don't trouble, because half the time they are only having a glorious time with themselves, pretending that every man must have fallen madly in love with them. And as long as they don't show it I suppose it is quite a harmless way of getting a kick out of life, only the pathetic part is that they are usually the women nobody does fall in love with very easily. The others don't have to pretend.

Chapter VIII

*The wallflower has proposed—Too well-known to marry—
Wife by instalments—Lucy was blind for ten years—The
clergymen—Débutantes and Society mothers—Arranging
wedding receptions—Furnishing homes*

IT WAS A LOVELY WARM SUNNY EVENING TOWARDS THE end of our first summer, and Heather and I were working hard at the office, trying not to think how much nicer it would be to tip all the unanswered mail into drawers in our desks and sally out into Bond Street before the shops closed.

"Can you see Mr. Dewlap?" asked the secretary, closing the door behind her. "He says he's only got a few minutes before he catches his train, but he's got some news for you."

When clients say they have 'news' for us it usually means they are engaged but, in his case, since we were getting to know him, we were afraid it only meant he had installed another pump. However, when he came in he was looking so changed we thought he really must be engaged after all.

He still wore his mackintosh in spite of the day, but several of the lines had vanished from his face and he seemed a few inches taller because he wasn't stooping so much.

"I've done it," he announced proudly, and there was almost a sparkle in his eyes when he said it.

For a moment we thought at least he must have sprung a surprise on us and gone to a registry office and got married by special licence that afternoon.

"She's thinking it over," he added, without a trace of anxiety.

We then realized he had made his first proposal, and in the thrill of this achievement he had forgotten that her answer might easily be in the negative.

Of course, we hadn't the heart to suggest such an eventuality, so we invited him to tell us all about it. He told us quite boyishly and was even prepared to laugh at the picture he must have cut when he was doing it.

"It's Miss Jordan," he said. "You know she's very kind and sensible. I did it in Regent's Park. We were sitting on a bench having a rest, because we'd spent half the afternoon looking for my hat which I'd dropped a long way back when I was thinking how I should say it. And then I made an awful fool of myself and forgot my wonderful speech, and just said: 'Will you marry me? I'm rather lonely.' So now she's thinking it over," he repeated proudly, as though he had definitely been accepted.

Now that we knew who it was we were afraid his luck would be out. She was a plain, cheerful, middle-aged district nurse, who had only been out with him twice before and said she didn't find him very interesting. We put them in touch because originally he asked us only to introduce him to people who were within cycling distance of his garage. This woman lived fifty miles away, but she had a motor bicycle.

So far she hadn't gone to see him as he had become more shrewd and only invited her to meet him in London. Perhaps he was beginning to guess that he would have to get a plumber before he could take a bride home. We used to hear about the garage from the clients who did go and see it. Apparently he only lived in the kitchen. The other rooms were waiting for his wife to restore order and cleanliness while he was busy in the garden. Nobody seemed terribly impressed with the idea of taking on the garage after he had been 'batching it' there for years, though most of them were sorry for him and said he was a nice man.

When we saw him out of the office that afternoon we had to stop our work to talk over how we were going to cheer

him up, because we felt he was going to be so terribly crest-fallen if Miss Jordan turned him down, which we had every presentiment she was going to do.

She rang us up next morning to tell us about the proposal herself, and how she hadn't the heart to refuse him on the spot so she told him she would think it over. As we ourselves hadn't the heart even to suggest she might turn him down when he came into the office we felt we couldn't blame her. Especially as he told us he had walked all the way from Regent's Park to Bond Street and we could see he was much too elated with his proposal to notice the distance.

Every day in the Marriage Bureau seems to have its strange event. That afternoon it took the shape of a very eminent retired foreign diplomat living in London, who came in to discuss his matrimonial future after a heavy lunch and fell fast asleep, full length, on the settee in our decorative interviewing room.

Somehow we did not feel it would go down very well with our women clients if they arrived and found a figure lying asleep with a florid face, and a cigar hanging out of the corner of his bushy beard. So we tried delicately to wake him up, first by jangling the telephone, and then by dropping books, but he never stirred. We didn't like to risk annoying him by prodding him or trying to shake him awake, for he was a man of means as well as eminence, and we hoped to arrange his marriage quite easily. And so, after making a lot of noise all for nothing, we decided we could only trust that no visitors would arrive before he woke up naturally.

I said we hoped to arrange his marriage easily, especially as he is so well known, but he has proved a heavy burden to us and we are still trying. We thought so many women would like his money and the limelight of marrying him. Besides, he would be a very impressive figure to accompany to public dinners because he must wear so many orders.

But the type of London society woman he wants to marry all say they know of him and would hate to meet him.

We rather gather all their friends would think it a huge joke if they married him.

Then he will only meet people who are within a reasonable taxi-ride from the West End, so we don't like to introduce him to anybody farther away than South Kensington.

The only women who are anxious to meet him are the ones who have led very ordinary London lives and would like a little excitement (this is before they have listened to his boring stories). Then he goes off to have a look at them 'in their own background,' as he puts it, which really means he polishes off their whiskey. Meanwhile he tells them some interminable story they cannot follow at all, until the whiskey is finished. After which he departs, to eat a large dinner by himself.

In a way he is an interesting case because in spite of his material success he has never been married, and in his own eyes he has always been a hero to all the prettiest girls in Europe. I don't know what he was like when he was young, but you would think he must at least have tried to get married at an earlier age.

When he first appeared he looked such a gay old dog we half feared we should find ourselves having to tell him that only people who seriously want to get married are allowed on the books (a task which on rare occasions we have to perform). But he asked for someone nearly his own age and was evidently quite serious about his intentions.

He has had plenty of introductions since then, but there are still no signs of a successful result. I suspect what he really enjoys is getting letters from unknown women and then seeing what they look like, so he doesn't mind a bit when they cannot face his anecdotes a second time.

While he was still prostrate on our settee another visitor was ushered in. Fortunately it was not a woman client, but a grey-haired little man with a pale face and very thick spectacles, who glanced hazily at the recumbent figure as though it were nothing more extraordinary than a dog lying asleep on the mat.

"I've just come from Liverpool," he said, and we remembered his writing to us for an interview. So far we did not know his story.

Before he shook hands he had to take his hand out of his overcoat pocket, and then he found his umbrella was still hanging on his wrist. He looked as though he must have hung it there when he left Liverpool, and forgotten all about it till he got to our office.

"I'm so glad you could come up and have a talk; it makes things so much easier," I replied encouragingly, for he seemed perplexed at finding himself in our office.

Then he came out of the clouds and told us his story.

"I've had two terrible losses which were almost too much for me to bear," he said, looking down at his boots. "They happened in the same week."

We maintained a sympathetic silence.

"You see all my life I've had one great hobby. I was building a big boat in a special shed I had made for it. And just as the boat was almost finished the shed collapsed in a severe gale and my boat was destroyed. The same week my wife died," he finished, with his eyes still on his boots.

The way he told it we did not know which had been the worse disaster, the boat collapsing or his wife's death. However, we commiserated in an even manner with both his bereavements, and gradually he came to the point that he wanted to marry again, although he did not feel there was much hope for him.

"You see my wife always fought the battle of life for me," he explained, "and now that I haven't got her, or any occupation, there's no incentive to begin life again unless I could meet somebody so charming she would compel me to make an effort for her sake.

"The trouble is I shall never meet anybody on my own because I've always shrunk from society. You know for years I've been working in a room by myself, making up prescriptions for a chemist all day and then building my boat in the evening. I think that's really why I've got some sort

of inferiority complex that seems to be accumulative. I've got hardly any money and really nothing to recommend me, so I shouldn't be a social asset," he added forlornly.

"Well, I think the right wife, if we can find her, would take away your inferiority complex and give you all the incentive you need to start a new life," I said, for he made me feel anxious to cheer him up.

"I don't want to inflict sorrow on any woman," he said, "but I do wish I could see in life what others are able to see."

"Well, you're naturally feeling a bit hopeless at the moment. And I'm very glad you came to us to try and get you out of it."

There was something very touching and tremendously likeable about the little boat builder. It made us want to do all we could to help him. We could picture him working lovingly on his ship, living happily in his dream of when it was finished, and being an absent-minded but devoted husband to a wife who rather indulged him. Now his whole world was swept from under him and he was feeling lost and thoroughly lonely, but he only wanted a little affection and encouragement to set him on his feet again.

We talked to him till he had to catch his train back to Liverpool, and when he left our office we were glad to see he was already beginning to take a much better view of life.

I do not think he even noticed the eminent gentleman on the sofa when he left. We ourselves had been so wrapped in the boat builder's story we had forgotten him, but just as we decided something should now be done about him the secretary took the matter into her own hands.

"Would you like some tea?" she called loudly in his ear.

"Tea! Good gracious!" he said, sitting up with a jolt. "I beg your pardon, I must have dropped off," he added, without apparently feeling any embarrassment.

"We didn't like to disturb you," Heather said politely, and we noticed he hurried off without waiting for his tea. I think he must have missed an important meeting in the City.

After he went we had a woman who came in and complained she couldn't think of marrying some man because he drank his soup from the point of the spoon instead of the side. And she demonstrated his deportment at the dinner-table with one of the pencils on my desk.

The nurse who eventually married the boat builder had a way of finding something wrong with every man she met. This we had tried to correct by the time we introduced her to him.

When they were in the courting stage she did have a little to say about the ship building making a mess, because he brought in pieces for it into the house and laid them about everywhere. But we were able to point out how little it mattered when he was such a nice character, and I do not think she made any fuss about it to him.

What was so gratifying to us was that, since knowing her, he had started rebuilding, for surely it was evidence that he had started life afresh. She must have given him the "charming feminine influence" he said he needed to make him do it, so we felt very glad to have found her.

Before they were married she used to go down and spend the day with him. She found the garden covered in weeds and the house looking sadly as though it had been without a woman in it for several months, so in a quiet capable way she began to set it in order, preparing surprise meals for him while he was working. And having begun the task, and seeing him thrive on it, she was encouraged to continue.

I think as a nurse she was so accustomed to going into households that had crumpled up from lack of attention, and setting them running again to please and soothe the person who was ill. And at first the boat builder was just another invalid, because in a sense anybody who is very unhappy is ill. To begin with it was like doing her job and she fell into it automatically, and while she was doing it she discovered that this sad, distraught figure of a man was unfolding into a happy loveable character. Then they grew fond

of each other, and the practical friendship turned into real devotion and romance.

There is a type of woman, especially when she is not so very young, to whom a reliant man has a tremendous appeal, and she was one of them. Judging by his letters she was exactly what he needed. As far as we can gather she has taken up 'the battle of life' for him with great success. And until the boat was finished he was paying us for his wife in instalments of half a crown a week.

While we were trying to settle the boat builder's future we had a visit from somebody who will always be one of our favourite clients.

Lucy is the gayest thing on earth. I remember the first time she came to see us; how a tiny creature, only five feet high, with the most sparkling personality I have ever met, came cheerfully round the door and won our hearts at once. She wore a round hat and a bright-coloured frock, and although her curls were grey she carried with her such an abundance of youth it must have infected everyone she met.

Her freshness, and the way she seemed poised on the edge of a world she had just discovered to be wonderful, were difficult to reconcile with the homely type of woman who stood before us. But she soon gave us the explanation.

"I was totally blind for ten years," she told us, "and then I had a successful operation on my eyes, and now I can see perfectly. Oh, it's just the most wonderful thing that ever happened; I still can't believe it. And now I can see, I thought perhaps I might be able to get married?" she finished, glancing inquiringly at us both.

No wonder she seemed on the threshold of an exciting new world. All the time she was blind she never thought there was a hope of ever getting her sight back. We could see her taking it bravely and philosophically, but it needed little imagination to know how she must have suffered in mind over it. She had worked energetically at handicrafts with other blind people, and done gardening in a garden where she could no longer see the flowers, and I should think

as far as it was humanly possible she was very independent of her blindness.

Now she was revelling in an orgy of sightseeing over even the most ordinary things in life, going about with all the excitement of a tourist on her first holiday abroad. And, among all the new possibilities that she felt had returned with her sight, she thought somebody might want to marry her. This was one of the things she felt were right out of reach while she was blind, and she was delighted merely at the possibility.

The bright-coloured frock was an expression of pleasure at being able to see colours again. She wanted to marry somebody good-looking. Probably she would enjoy his good looks all the more because she would be perpetually delighted that she could see his face.

"Did you find you liked people better when you saw their faces for the first time?" I asked her.

"No, mostly I was disappointed," she said candidly, "chiefly because I found I'd imagined them looking quite different, and I was rather cross they didn't look like I expected."

It was not an immediate cure with Lucy's blindness.

"I could only see in a haze at first," she said, "and that went on for two or three years before I could see clearly. I shall never forget the day I was going to post a letter and thought I saw a pillar-box, but I was a bit puzzled to find it was moving about—just as though I might have had one over the eight or something. Anyway, when we got close up to it I said to my friend: 'Here's a pillar-box. I can post my letter.' And my friend said: 'That's not a pillar-box. It's a Chelsea pensioner!' We had some funny times, but I can see better than that now," she added gaily.

All the time she was either smiling at us, or looking at everything in the room with rather penetrating interested eyes, like a child with a heap of new toys in front of her. It did cross my mind that she still could not see at all and was putting on a brilliant piece of acting because she wanted to

come on our books. But she was able to read the registration form as well as find her way about, so there was no fear of that.

"I must marry somebody with a sense of humour whom I can have fun with," she said, and we agreed it was very important. We were wondering whether we could find someone with the same joy of living, or whether she would have enough for two.

One of these days, when she gets married, we are going to miss her visits to the office. She comes in very often and always livenes up our day.

Lucy nearly married a clergyman, but then she decided he was not amusing enough, and she didn't think she would be good in the parish. We have many clergymen on the books from all over the British Isles, most of them middle-aged, but fortunately none of them are curates; even a vicar's income is not much of a draw.

Usually they have very little money, and some are widowers with a family to support on it as well. As far as the Marriage Bureau is concerned we find they come in very handy for the not so young spinsters who have a secret passion for the vicar in their own parish. If we can persuade them to transfer their passion it works out very well as they are already accustomed to helping with Church work.

Heather had one interview with an elderly clergyman who couldn't make up his mind whether he should marry somebody middle-aged, or whether the parish would be scandalized if he married an attractive young girl, which was what he really fancied. So Heather suggested it might cheer the parish up a lot if he married the young girl, though his teeth were so far apart she felt a certain amount of misgiving that any young girl would be carried away by his smile.

There is a country clergyman of about sixty who has settled down in the rectory with one of our clients as his housekeeper. She is about the same age and helps him with the parish as well as the housekeeping. Periodically we write them as tactful a letter as we can, saying we hope they

are happy and will they let us know when they are going to be married. But there is still no response and we are beginning to feel a trifle embittered, especially as these letters are not easy to compose.

Soon after we opened the Bureau a great many débutantes were brought along in a very businesslike way by their mothers—who wanted to put them on our books either because they had already been launched unsuccessfully in the London marriage market, or because the parents were cutting out entertaining in the difficult times before the war and the daughters would not have the same opportunity of meeting people.

The trouble with pre-war 'deb dances' was that most of the young men who went to them were not eligible. So except from the shop-window aspect the dances meant a lot of wasted outlay. Several of the mothers said openly they thought it more practical to bring the daughters to us.

Many of these Society mothers had been too ambitious and had prevented their daughters marrying before in case later they met someone more impressive. We had one very contrite letter from a mother who had twice broken off her daughter's engagement.

'The great sorrow I am suffering from now,' she wrote, 'is that I refused to sanction my daughter's marriage when she was nineteen, and again when she was twenty and had a most devoted fiancé, but I thought she was too young to go abroad.

'Unfortunately she listened to me, although it was a most desirable match, and since then she has had several offers, but never now takes much interest in men.

'Night after night I go through the most terrible retribution and feel I have broken into her dear life. Of all my children she is the finest and noblest, and so kind to me.'

I am glad to say we were able to answer this poignant letter by introducing the girl to several of our nicest and most

eligible young men. She is very attractive and well worth the mother's regard for her, and we expect to see her married to one or other of them before very long.

While we were getting the first débutantes married off we thought we would strike out on a sideline and organize wedding receptions as an additional Marriage Bureau service. Heather took this in hand very competently, and we were rather proud of the way she was able to prepare a reception for three hundred guests at considerably lower cost than usual.

But it meant a great deal of extra work, and we were quite relieved when people gave up having big receptions because of the war.

It was not only the work of seeing the caterers, florists and everyone else and planning all the details, but there were many other duties that descended on us unexpectedly:

Such as dealing with a bride who discovered immediately after the wedding that she was in love with the best man and attempted to run away with him after the reception. Finding a fresh bridesmaid, the same size, to deputize for one who was taken ill. Concealing somebody's elderly aunt who wasn't used to champagne from the disgrace of being intoxicated in public, by piling her into a taxi at a side door. Staying behind to watch the last dregs of the guests, who were frequently intoxicated; collecting each other's hats and coats; and seeing the caterers left the house tidy. And finally being buttonholed by the bride's mother for a belated "Do you think they'll be happy?" conversation after it was all over.

Heather found she often had all kinds of queer diplomatic missions to perform before these weddings. There was one girl whose mother was very mean over the champagne and said she would only provide six bottles for nearly a hundred guests. So we had to induce the bridegroom to bring the supply of champagne up to the right quantity.

We managed to do this very tactfully, and he produced

a large supply which had to be hidden until the mother was busy receiving the guests.

In the end the reception was a great success; everybody had plenty of champagne and the mother was too fuddled with it herself to notice how the supply had increased. Perhaps she counted the corks in astonishment next morning, but by that time the daughter was miles away on her honeymoon.

One of the biggest weddings Heather organized was in the country, and when it was over, when she thought all the guests had gone, she discovered a party of young Naval officers had carried away several bottles of champagne which they were imbibing blissfully under the trees at the bottom of the garden. They were making rather a lot of noise, and as the bride's father was very pompous she felt they had to be included in the clearing-up operations, though otherwise she would have overlooked them.

Another side-line we started was furnishing our clients' houses, and we are still doing it and find it much more interesting and satisfactory.

Heather does all the designing and furnishing for the Marriage Bureau, and she nearly always has several houses or flats on her hands at once. Often nowadays the couple have a short engagement because the man is going away on active service. They want to see as much of each other as they can and not be bothered with furnishing, so they tell Heather what they want and get her to do it for them.

There are many dramas here, too, and she remembers painfully the task she had trying to furnish their home for a couple who had taken a small semi-detached house in the suburbs.

The bridegroom had no ideas at all beyond huge creaking wardrobes and the sort of heavy tables that you see under a red plush tablecloth with a fringe. And his fiancée kept saying: "I want it done in the Oriental style."

As Heather did not see how she could make either, or both, their ideas look in sympathy with the little building

estate house, she suggested a scheme of her own. But the young man merely regarded her sketches with bovine indifference, while the girl kept on reiterating: "I like the Oriental style."

So Heather took them both to a big furniture store, hoping that when she showed them the kind of furniture she had in mind they might see something they liked and begin to see her point of view.

She led them to a section which had the kind of light, plain, modern furniture she knew would go with the house, and waited while the salesman opened drawers, swung mirrors, turned things round back to front and did everything he could to prove they were good value.

The young man watched the process gloomily and registered no interest at all, and the girl looked scathingly at the salesman as though he were merely making a fool of himself.

"I want something rich," she said icily.

Heather spent an exhausting morning trying to find what she meant by 'rich' furniture, which was difficult, as she didn't seem to know herself.

Eventually she persuaded them to let her go ahead with her original scheme. But when she went to have tea with them after they were married she found the 'Oriental style' had won, and the house was filled with brass trays and elaborate bric-à-brac which smothered her simple decoration.

In the meantime I was having a trying time with the girl's parents, who made a heavy fetish of their respectability. "We don't want anything nasty to happen," they kept on telling me every time we discussed the daughter's future, just as though she was going to be abducted the moment she met one of our clients. When she got engaged they looked the young man over with deep suspicion, but fortunately decided he was all right, though they did it rather reluctantly as though they still half-thought 'something nasty' might happen even with him. We were very pleased when they became engaged because he was brought up in

the same kind of atmosphere and couldn't, under any stretch of imagination, be called a dark stranger in their midst.

Sometimes Heather has designed homes on paper for people living abroad. This is generally in the case of young men who are living in the East and want their bride to go out there and find an attractive home waiting for them.

But I think what she enjoyed most of all was furnishing a small motor-yacht for a man who wanted to live on it the whole summer when he got married.

He managed house property in London, and he got engaged to a girl who was manageress of a block of service flats in the West End. They both thought it would be very romantic to live on the yacht for the summer, but he was very anxious she should not see it before Heather took it in hand.

'As you know,' he wrote in his letter, 'Isobel is greatly attached to any kind of boat, dinghy or even a barge, and the thought of living on the *Mermaid* simply thrills her, but I feel I would like it to be absolutely super when she comes aboard for the first time.

'Being rather a weather-beaten bachelor for so long, I have never really taken any interest in the interior decoration, hence the dilapidations and the enormous amount of lumber, which has gradually accumulated in every possible space of the *Mermaid*.

'At the moment there are faded cretonne curtains somehow attached to the windows, and a well-worn orange-patterned carpet. . . .

'I think I had better tell you, although I am ashamed to admit it, that the curtains where I sleep are mauve, orange and green daubs and zigzags. Of course, they are very badly faded, and funnily enough I have never paid attention to them, but on seeing them now believe they are bound to make anyone feel sick before the boat even moves.

'I suppose by now you are feeling utterly ill, and am

sorry on behalf of the *Mermaid*. However, if you will come down one week-end I will book you a room at a nearby hotel, and will gladly pay any medical advice you may require.

‘I have not told Isobel anything about this as I want it to be a surprise for her, and you know her happiness means everything to me. . . .’

So Heather went down to Hamble and set to work on the *Mermaid* at once. He did not want to spend a lot of money on it, so she found a local boy who helped to keep it clean to do the painting while she went back to Town and chose the new curtains and furnishings.

Before she went she persuaded him to throw away many of his bachelor possessions. Much of the ‘lumber’ he referred to consisted of easels and paint, and those she stored away somewhere else by saying he would not want to paint on his honeymoon. There were also a rare quantity of saucepans and frying-pans in various stages of neglect, for the cleaning of them defeated him and he always bought new ones when they got too dirty. But with true masculine sentiment, which is often so oddly misplaced, he had not thrown the old ones away.

When she finished, Heather had transformed the *Mermaid* into a vision of new white paint (with a thin blue piping here and there because he wanted something blue), attractive curtains and fittings, and even two hidden bunks so they could have friends for the week-end.

And when the man wrote and thanked her he said he could not believe it was the same boat, while apparently his Isobel was enchanted with it.

Chapter IX

An old-fashioned spinster unfolds her wings—Who will buy my title?—How the Marriage Bureau deals with a fortune hunter—Dealing with divorcees—Widowers at a premium—A lesson in love letters—Some of the photographs—More hints on marriage—A disastrous meeting—Loneliness, the reason why most people come to the Marriage Bureau

WE DON'T ALWAYS ENCOURAGE CLIENTS TO GET ENGAGED to each other, if we think it best we sometimes do exactly the reverse. For instance we advised a woman who was almost middle-aged not to accept either of two men we introduced her to, even though she was past her first youth and for all we knew might not have another chance.

In spite of her age and considerable plumpness she has had five proposals in quite a short time, which considering life has literally only just begun for her must be a bewildering opening to her career.

All her best years had gone in looking after an invalid mother, who in the end became very difficult, and in running a large Victorian house in Wales where she had no existence of her own. The mother was well grafted into this Victorian monstrosity because it had been the family mansion for generations. She had the sort of matriarchal power that I thought only existed in fiction; the daughter was completely enslaved.

I saw it myself, because the daughter, who was called Fanny, got in touch with us before the old lady died, and I was invited down under a promise that I said nothing about the Marriage Bureau.

Directly the mother died Fanny stepped out into the

world like a new-born butterfly unfolding its wings. She found herself with £2,000 a year and no ties of any kind, so she plunged gaily into her belated youth with all the spirit of seventeen.

First she sold the Victorian mansion and its entire contents with all possible speed and without letting it hang about by putting a reserve on it. Then she took a bright, comfortable little modern flat in London, and furnished it with new furniture in complete contrast to everything she had left behind. And when she came on the books of the Marriage Bureau she bought herself an expensive fur coat, though she still clung to some dangling necklaces and lumps of amber hung on black ribbons that belonged to her former life. She launched ardently into a time-table of Turkish baths and slimming exercises and showed us the result proudly.

Everybody likes her because she is so kind-hearted and full of fun. We are able to tease her and she always enjoys the joke—such as the time somebody took her (I believe in all innocence as he had lived abroad all his life) to a West End rendezvous which, in Edwardian days, acquired a racy reputation that now clings to it like disreputable hangings.

“Such a fascinating place, with wonderful antiques,” she told us, “and such an *interesting* old woman in charge of it, my dears.”

When we told her she had been to tea at what was virtually a high-class brothel she was very amused.

When she asks men clients to see her she gives them a special lunch at one of the best hotels and then gives them tea at the flat.

We never charge for interviews, but when she comes to see us she insists on paying us a guinea each time, which she lays firmly on my desk, saying: “There you are, my dears, business is business, you know.”

There are plenty of people we should like to charge heavily for interviews, but not Fanny, because she gives us so little trouble and is always helpful and sensible to deal with.

It is certainly to her credit, in view of her former dull life, that she didn't lose her head and marry the first person who came along, but she is very sensible, and I think when she does marry she will have made her choice wisely.

She wants to marry a widower for preference, with one or more children, but not children over ten years old as she is afraid they might be too big to grow fond of her. She would make a wonderful stepmother.

"I'm too old to have any myself, you know," she tells us, and we have to be polite and look faintly incredulous.

One proposal she discussed with us came from a very brilliant man who was covered with intellectual honours, but he was partly foreign, and as that seemed to worry her we dissuaded her from marrying him. Also he had quantities of relations, and Fanny was scared of relations after the powerful possessiveness of her mother.

The other man we advised her not to marry was a retired Major who wanted her to put some money into a business. We are always on the watch to protect our clients from fortune hunters.

So far the most arrant fortune-hunter we ever came across was a Spanish marquis who wanted to sell his title for £50,000 down, but we discovered this before he came on the books and refused to let him register.

He approached us by introducing himself in a very flattering and grand form on the telephone, which we felt was in very poor taste, and inviting me to lunch with him at the Hyde Park Hotel. According to his own account he was tall, with a good figure and plenty of hair—quite good-looking, you know, and I wear a monocle. But when I met him in the cocktail lounge I saw a small fat man with bleary eyes, a white face, and rather a bald head. The only thing I could really check up on was the monocle.

"Splendid, perfectly splendid of you to turn up," he said in a throaty voice, while I, having taken an immediate dislike to him, was thinking it would be perfectly splendid of me if I stayed.

“What will you drink?”

I asked for a dry martini.

“Dry martini, nonsense! I never drink anything but champagne in the morning,” he said loudly, and ordered two champagne cocktails, which we drank while he complimented me noisily on the Marriage Bureau, till I became aware of the enthralled silence of the eavesdroppers at the other little glass-topped tables and wished I could get up and fly through the swing doors.

All through lunch he told me about his divorced wife who was French, and how he now wanted to marry for money as there must be somebody who would like to marry him.

“Very good family, you know,” he repeated emphatically for about the ninth time, while I wondered how I could sit through the remaining courses with the entire dining-room hearing our conversation.

I asked him whether he would prefer somebody dark or fair.

“I don’t care a bit what she looks like as long as she has money,” he shouted blatantly. “Push her around in a bath-chair, you know, if necessary.”

Of course, I had long since made up my mind that he should never come on the books. But I put through a few inquiries about him, and found his title was genuine but he had enjoyed a rather chequered career, which included selling racehorses for his friends and keeping the money. He had also sold aeroplanes to Spain in the civil war which had involved him in various international difficulties.

His married life began with a poor wife whom he divorced because she had no money (of course, the official reason was a different one). He then married a rich woman and went back to live with his divorced wife whom he kept in style on the second wife’s money. The French woman having become wise to this and divorced him he was evidently now looking for a third wife who could afford to support himself and his first wife for the rest of their days.

Another man who in a sense was a fortune-hunter we did put on the books and find him a wife, but he was in a very different category.

A sister came in and registered him with us. She had the girls to tea first, and if she liked them she passed them on to him to meet.

When we met him we liked him. He was working for his living in London, but he had on his hands a big estate in Scotland which he had to keep up on insufficient means, and it would have been very tragic if he had to sell it. I think his sister thought it would be even more tragic, and that was what made her come to us to find him a reasonably rich wife.

He married a fairly young widow to whom we introduced him, who had been left quite well off by her last husband. I remember she was very nice and very overdressed, for she used to wear a pale pink frock and a long coat made of silver foxes and another silver fox on her head. Beyond hoping she would not wear these clothes in Scotland we had no misgivings about her, and I believe the marriage was a great success, especially as she rallied to the support of the home.

We have a good many divorced people on our books, and whenever we can we like to know why they got divorced as it helps us in finding them a fresh partner. But, unless they volunteer to tell us, we cannot very well ask them, as it is really none of our business, so in that case we advise the people we introduce them to to find out for themselves.

Some of them are so eager to meet someone else that they come to us before the divorce has reached its final stage, so actually we must be careful not to let them have any introductions until they are quite free to marry again.

I think the most extraordinary divorce case we heard of was the couple (it was the woman who came to the Marriage Bureau) who had lived in the same little suburban villa for a whole year never speaking, and merely writing notes to each other. And the quarrel only started because he said

something she did not like and then would not apologize to her, so she refused to speak to him. How they managed to endure life in such a small house for a whole year of note-writing was quite beyond our comprehension, and we had to be careful to see her next husband wasn't also as stubborn as herself.

The Scotsman was a widower, and he was a godsend to us just then, for widowers were at a premium. We had a great demand for them all at once, chiefly because we had so many widows between forty and fifty who wanted to marry middle-aged widowers.

The situation was so urgent we almost had to go out canvassing for widowers, and Heather and I even wrote to our bachelor uncles asking them to marry.

In this hasty whip round for them we collected my father's tailor, who I discovered was a widower, and married him off to a widow in Richmond with about four or five hundred a year.

Even when there was such a demand for them Mr. Dewlap was one widower whose marriage still seemed an unlikely event. When Miss Jordan turned him down he wrote us an abusive letter, but repented of it about a month later when he came in for advice.

He wanted to know why so many women he wrote to never wanted to meet him, and I spent an afternoon coaching him on how to write his letters. I suggested that instead of writing pages on all the things he was going to do to his garage, which might bore them as they had never seen it (I did not add they might look unfavourably on the fact that it needed so many improvements), he should tell them about himself. And instead of drawing a depressing picture of a lonely man 'batching it' on twenty acres he should tell them how travelled he was, where he had been, that he was fond of music and gardening, and in fact write himself up in a more encouraging way.

Sometimes we have to tell clients to stop sending their photograph round with their letters, because while they

themselves have at least a certain amount of charm, the photograph is so unflattering that it brings the correspondence to an abrupt end.

One girl who was really quite attractive sent round a photograph of herself wearing glasses, and some men used to send it back saying they did not want to meet her because she wore spectacles. Yet all the ones who did meet her found the spectacles didn't detract from her charm in the least.

The most memorable photograph of the many sent to the Marriage Bureau was a family group in old-fashioned bathing dresses, taken very obviously in a studio and not on the sea-shore, with a row of shells and an oar. The small child on the extreme right of this bizarre little gathering was now the man of sixty who wanted to be put on the books. We wanted to frame it and hang it on the office wall.

Ninety per cent of the snapshots and photographs show the individual taken either with a dog or a chair, which proves how self-conscious the average person is when being photographed. And a trick some of the widowers have is to send women clients a photograph of their first wife, which never goes down very well. I suppose they do it as much as to say: "Look, this attractive woman married me, so I must be a pretty decent sort of chap." The clients' reaction is that he probably never stops talking about her.

Our advice ranges over all kinds of serious and intimate matters. One young man told us in confidence that a girl we introduced him to had felt she must unload a confession about an affair the first time he took her out. Of course it embarrassed him and put him off, and we wondered how we could stop her doing it to anyone else without letting her know he had told us.

Confessions to anyone—parents, fiancé or husband—should be avoided. In most cases, it is indulged in as a form of selfishness or exhibitionism, intended to draw forth sympathy or attention; and so it tends to confuse rather than clarify the emotional atmosphere.

One of the important things a man asks for in his future bride is that her moral values should be as high, if not higher, than his own—and he usually knows this by instinct—and that she should be a good and affectionate wife. Confessions on either side are only distasteful and don't help anybody.

We find the best marriages are founded more on liking than on romantic love. There is something deeper and more reliable in marriage than the bubble of romance that we all know can break at one wrong word, because romance by itself is one of the things that cannot be invisibly mended.

Most people look for a real companion to share their life, and true companionship is a blend of the right mentality and the right temperament. If two people have the same values, they will have similar aims, and therefore are unlikely to quarrel. As a great many people find to their cost, physical attraction, which so delighted them at first, eventually turns to revulsion if they are totally unsuited mentally.

Much of our time is taken up with young women—and older ones—who, like the church mouse who arrived soon after we started, have to be mentally and physically re-furbished before we feel we can suit them with the right husband.

There are many things a shy, lonely and sexually unattractive girl can do to make herself into a happier and more popular person. The graces of the drawing-room and ballroom can be learned, just as they have to be learned by an actress, who may have to practise for hours merely walking across the stage. And if a geisha girl can be trained in all the arts of pleasing and entertaining a cultured man why should not the average girl who wants to marry take trouble to learn how to attract?

For her a few dancing lessons are an infinitely better investment than packets of cigarettes or even new clothes: not only for the mere asset of being a good dancer, but because they will teach her command of her body and grace

of movement and incidentally help her to 'wear' her clothes. In fact they will take her a long way towards charm.

Then there are the women who say to us: "Yes, but look at these teeth of mine," or "How can I get round my nose and my fat ankles?" Some of the most attractive married women I know have had some physical defect to overcome. Yet they have charmed men into overlooking the flaws. In fact these defects often force them to take extra trouble over their appearance.

Unfortunately some of the women who come to us try too hard to please when they meet a client and become unnatural. There is all the difference in the world between making the best of yourself and then not caring whether, to use a vulgar term, you 'click' or not (which is the right way to please a man) or behaving as if you are sitting for a stiff examination on which your whole future depends.

There was a woman who, like our early church mouse, had lived a very local life and had now broken out of this small circle which held no romance for her, and come to the Marriage Bureau. I remember the day she was to meet a man at the office. To begin with she arrived much too early, which was a mistake. Her manner was rather prim and precise, and she was spruced up to such a degree one could almost feel her praying a hair would not slip out of place. Every detail about those clothes had mattered beyond everything all through that day, and she had put them on far too early and done nothing in them for fear of spoiling them. When she sat down she never relaxed, but sat as though she were wired inside.

Presently the man arrived and was introduced. He was on time but gallant enough to apologize for being late, and, feeling her tenseness, he assumed an unnaturally cheerful manner. I wondered then whether this foolish woman had queered things from the start by putting him in the embarrassing position of finding her there first. However, he took

her across the road for coffee and made another appointment to meet her, but then he dropped her because her eagerness was so apparent.

Most of the meetings take place in a hotel or restaurant, and I believe they all, both men and women, thoroughly enjoy the excitement of meeting a complete stranger who has been introduced to them by a Marriage Bureau. We conclude this as we are so seldom asked to introduce them to each other ourselves.

It was one of my uncles who suggested jokingly that he might get about five girls to meet him in the foyer of a certain restaurant at a stated time, all wearing a white carnation. He would then turn up—without his carnation and watch the effect. But we told him that as he would only get one fresh introduction at a time it was no good contemplating anything of the kind.

Sometimes couples do miss each other, either by accident or casualness, and we have to calm the injured party and find out what happened. Anybody careless about these things in the beginning naturally has to be rebuked, but usually there has been some mistake and everything is put right.

We shall never forget the day a young city typist arranged to meet under the clock at Waterloo station a bank clerk from the provinces. They met successfully, and then they went to a cafeteria for tea where they had to stand in a queue and pile things on a tray.

He left her standing in the queue saying he was going to secure a table and would come back to carry the tray for her. Having laden it with delicacies for two, rather indiscriminately because she thought he might be hungry, she looked round and couldn't see him anywhere. She waited and waited, growing more dismal all the time, with the tray planted at the end corner of the counter and the waitresses eyeing her because she was expecting the young man to appear and pay for all the things on it. But he never came, and after hanging about, very stupidly, for

three-quarters of an hour, she gave him up. She appeared at our office next day looking distinctly ruffled.

Of course, we thought the young man had been very naughty and run away after seeing her (though we were surprised because she was attractive), so we tried to get in touch with him to tell him it was not the way to treat our clients.

Three weeks later, when we thought he had vanished inexcusably from our horizon as well, we got a letter from him saying that just as he was going to find the table he saw a friend in the army, whom he hadn't seen for months, and thought he might never meet again. He dashed out into the street and across the road to try and catch him, and in doing so got knocked down by a car and quite badly injured. And while the girl was waiting in the tea queue he was taken off to hospital where he couldn't remember her address.

So we apologized for having misjudged him and sent her off to the hospital to see him, and a few months later they got engaged.

When they are particularly coy about approaching us people often write and say they are making inquiries for a friend. Then as they get more confident they usually say the friend is not interested after all but they are thinking of coming on the books themselves. Either that or they have some friend they want to see married and they ask us to write to the friend and send them details about the Marriage Bureau.

We had one letter signed 'M. & O. Two Friends,' written about some girl they were particularly anxious should marry a New Zealander, and we were inclined to suspect it originated from a young man who wanted a clinging girl-friend out of the way so that he could concentrate on another.

We did have a man who came in and said quite openly he wanted us to get his girl-friend married. He paid five guineas and talked it over with us, and next time he brought her along with him. She took it all quite calmly and didn't

seem to mind in the least, although, of course, it must have been a little like pensioning her off because he was interested in someone else. He was about twice her age, I should think, while she was thirty-five and very good-looking.

Another day we had a letter from two girls who were great friends, saying they wanted to marry 'two brothers who are good friends as we are.' It can be imagined this was quite a difficult thing for us to arrange, and in the end they married two clients who were not brothers, but they lived in the same town, so that did nearly as well.

Before this there was quite a patch of trouble because one girl fell in love with a man in the North and the other fancied one in the South, and they had a long quarrel over who should give up her young man. However, we managed to settle it by finding another man in the same town in the North.

It was an extraordinary friendship that even made one of them give up her young man, but they were shop girls and had not only been to school together but they had always worked together behind the haberdashery counter in the same shop.

Immediately after this we sailed into another storm, over two daughters who wrote to us trying to get their mother married again. The mother agreed with alacrity to meet some of our clients, and we found an elderly retired widower, who had all the attributes she wanted, and sent him down to the country to call on her.

Unfortunately the eldest daughter came into the room and he fell for her straight away and ended by marrying the daughter instead. After this mother and daughter were not on speaking terms. We did our best to get the mother interested in someone else, but after several angry long distance calls she faded out of our existence.

People who exasperate us are the women who follow the stars and bring in their horoscopes, which they expect us to study before looking out any introductions for them.

'Change the name and not the letter,' they quote

breezily, and others imagine we can ring up the men clients rather like this:

"Oh, Mr. —, what month were you born in? Really! That comes under Jupiter. I'm afraid Mrs. — can't meet you as you weren't born under Cancer. I'm so sorry to have troubled you."

Somehow I don't fancy they would be very impressed with our methods if we did.

One woman even refused to deal with me and insisted on dealing with Heather instead, because of my birth month being unpropitious. She made me telephone for Heather from the restaurant where we met.

We didn't take her on, although she was very attractive, because she had a persecution mania. The first day she came to the office she looked fixedly at the closed door behind her before she poured out her confidences.

"I must be very careful," she said mysteriously, "in case any of the gang are following me."

Of course, at first we were a little startled by this remark, but we suggested calmly that it might be quite a good idea if 'the gang' did come along as then we could put them on the books.

She had a fantastic plan about what should happen when Heather went to see her at her flat in Margate. How she must knock twice and then go to the other side of the road, while she hid behind the curtain in an upper window. Then directly she dropped a white handkerchief on to the pavement my partner would know the coast was clear and that she was going to open the door for her.

Waiting in a coastal town in war-time for signals to be dropped from windows did not appeal to her, so she never went to see her.

It was pathetic really, because in every other way she was quite a rational person and very attractive, and I am pretty certain 'the gang' would never have originated if she hadn't been lonely.

Loneliness is the chief factor that brings people to the

Marriage Bureau, and we find it in every walk of life. In any typical bunch of our letters the word 'lonely' appears in most of them. I am looking through a little pile now in which I have come across a band of lonely men and women, some of them with every sort of blessing except enough human companionship.

There is a retired Army man, between forty and fifty, with a lovely country house and riding, fishing, shooting and sailing at his doorstep. He describes the full social country life and how he breeds racehorses as well. Of course, he describes the wife he wants, who has to be good at all these outdoor sports. It is quite an ordinary letter from a man who is well off and has a good many interests. But the postscript is the real headline.

P.S.—All this perhaps sounds very commercial, but believe me I am not really so, as I am lonely and desire someone to love and to be loved in return. And someone to look after and care for and to interest.

Then comes a letter from a rich widower in Scotland, whose name heads a long column in *Who's Who*. He says he is lonely too.

'I did not dream that it could be so lonesome in a city like London,' writes a Canadian in the next letter. And an Australian naval commander says: 'I am a total stranger in England. I do not know a soul and I feel very lonely and depressed.'

In the same little group is another widower, whose children have all grown up and left home, and he finds himself marooned in a big empty house in the North, with only the servants round him, feeling very lonely indeed.—A man who is lonely because he has gone into lodgings in a slum to be near his industrial war work.—And a girl in Glasgow who says: 'Although I have many friends I am very lonely. You see I was going with a young man for quite a number of years, but he became infatuated with another girl and married her.'

Then comes a young man who, between concentrating on his job to earn promotion and sticking to a widowed mother, has had no time to make friends, let alone meet a girl who might become his wife. 'Being just another lonely male I can't resist writing to you,' is how he begins his story.

There is another girl of twenty-two who works in a shop where the long hours tire her so much she had to give up going to dances, so she no longer meets any young men, and spends lonely evenings in lodgings by herself.

Saddest of all is the letter in copy-book handwriting from a private who was then in hospital in France with the B.E.F. He said: 'I receive letters from home just like the rest of my mates, but when they open letters from their sweet-hearts it causes a pang within me and makes me terribly envious.'

We did not know how badly he was wounded, whether he would ever get well, or how his future would develop. But we got some of our clients to write to him, and we wrote to him a good deal ourselves, just in case it helped him round the corner.

Before the war we used to find there were many more lonely young people than older ones. Young men and girls living in rooms by themselves in London, without much money to spend and no opportunities to go out and meet other young people—feeling their youth was going while there was so much to miss. They were far more lonely than the middle-aged retired people living in hotels, with money for bridge, and the pastime of minding other people's business in the same hotel.

Now the war has reversed all this, and it is the older ones who seem lonely. They have evacuated to the country and are missing the few friends in the old rut where they had dug themselves in. But the young people have more chance of making new friends and less time to be lonely, because several of their evenings are filled up with war duties where they meet others of their own age.

Our experience proves that lonely people are not

necessarily friendless because they are unattractive, penniless or stupid. We find the most attractive people are often bitterly lonely, just because they have lived abroad a long time, or merely that their luck is out over meeting any friends.

In fact, if any outside person could see our files they would be astonished at the number of lovely young women and eligible men whom we could point out as having come to us mainly because they were prompted by loneliness.

It is being the means of introducing them to each other and making these people happy, that gives us the best satisfaction from our job. Anybody who has ever been lonely at some time or other in their life (and who has not?) can easily appreciate how great that satisfaction is.

Chapter X

Another move for the office—The 'mating'

AT THE END OF OUR FIRST YEAR WE FELT WE SHOULD soon have to find a larger office. Our filing system alone was beginning to call for more space than we had available, and as we had seen a bigger suite in Bond Street we decided to move into the present home of the Marriage Bureau.

This time we had four rooms instead of three, a waiting-room, the secretary's office and two front rooms. The secretary's office was separate from the waiting-room in the new suite and had space for several large filing cabinets. And we made one front room the interviewing room, while the other is where Heather and I do the work of the day, including, of course, the match-making.

The mating, as we call it, is the most important part of our work, as this is when we decide whom each of the clients should meet. And as we devote most of our time to it, and certainly our most painstaking efforts, perhaps I should describe how it is done.

If you came into the waiting-room during a lull, when nobody was in the interviewing-room, you could see inside through the open door. You would find a large attractive room, with an off-white carpet, red satin curtains and a long settee. There are love-birds twittering in a cage hung above the writing-desk, and the only ornament is one of those Victorian bunches of highly coloured everlasting flowers mounted on velvet in a glass case. The sort of ornament that looks appalling in company with a lot of antimacassars and a horsehair sofa where it belongs, but surprisingly effective in a modern setting.

But the main feature of this room is its tidiness—or that is what would strike you if you could push open the closed door of the other front room where we work.

Picture us sitting one each side of a desk piled with card index boxes and correspondence. Letters have overflowed the edges of the desk and floated on to the floor. And on the only clear space of carpet a white Pekingese is rolling in delicious comfort before the gas fire, gnawing a rubber bone.

We use the floor a great deal, because no desk was ever made large enough to sort out our correspondence in groups which will help us answer them more promptly.

If you could see us at work in that room you might wonder that we ever come out of it sane. There are two telephones that seem to ring incessantly, while a mail that arrives in legionary quantities twice a day has to be opened and dealt with at once.

Of course, we are young and we try to be smart, so dress boxes and new hats arrive as well. And we are often so busy that the bacon we fried on a penholder (because there wasn't time to go out to lunch) gets forgotten until all the offices in Bond Street are closing their doors for the night.

But neither of us notices the whirl we live in, the way the bacon chills, or how the room gets lamentably untidy, because we are doing the 'mating' and it takes so much concentration. All the time we are looking up names and details we are remembering faces of our clients, their characters, their dispositions. Or if we have never seen our client the written particulars must compare even more thoroughly with the opposite number who is being sent to them in the post.

As we sit there we are painfully aware that the destiny of from twenty-five to thirty couples a day may hang on how accurately we can pick out the epitome of their dreams. And so we are never tempted to grow slack and shuffle them carelessly together, in the hope that a few chance happy marriages might appear from the mêlée.

We have kept to the same system of filing and indexing for 'mating' purposes that we had when we started, for it worked out very well.

People still on the books waiting to get married are entered in 'The Black Book.' This volume tells us their name, religion, age, income, and where they live, for they are also entered under alphabetical headings of towns, as well as the people they have met.

When they have paid their registration fee and become an official member each client is put into the Black Book and given a number. They also have a card in the card index box, which has on it full details, both of themselves and the type of person they want to marry. And the card has a record of the 'numbers' of the various people they have met, so there is no fear of our sending them the same introduction twice over.

For the main part we have to have a whole separate box of cards for each letter, one for men and another for women, but certain smaller groups of religion, like Jews for instance, have all the men and women in one box.

Anybody who overheard the odd scraps of conversation in our 'mating' office, without being able to read the serious detail of our thoughts, might think we had gone out of our minds. Here is a reproduction of the actual dialogue between Heather and me (only, of course, the clients' names are fictitious) during part of an afternoon's 'mating':

Mary: Heather, who can marry a policeman in Singapore?

Heather: How about Mary Minter in Glasgow. She's also a Roman Catholic and she wants to live abroad.

Mary: Let's look her up. Can I have the M. Women?

Heather: Ah, here she is. Oh, yes—she's an orphan. Her mother's left her a confectioner's shop.

Mary: What's she going to do with the shop if she marries? Oh, anyhow, as she wants to go abroad I suppose she's prepared to sell it.

Heather: If she makes sweets it's obvious she can cook. Will it be lost on the policeman?

Mary: It will in Singapore. I should think he'll have a certain amount of servants there. She'll be quite useful for all the local police bazaars, though, making sweets for them all. Anyhow, they seem to have a lot in common. Look, Heather, she's the right age and she's attractive, and she wants children, which he does.

Heather: Yes, and the great thing is, I should think she's very adaptable, and he seems a good-hearted, easy person to get on with. One *must* have a good-tempered husband in that climate. Who's next?

Mary: Mrs. Bootle.

Heather: What does she want?

Mary: She wants somebody 'well proportioned, cleanliness essential, fond of country life.'

Heather: What about Wilkinson?

Mary: Yes, hold on, I'm looking him up. I think Wilkinson's her man. He's three years older. Oh, no, Heather, they're not a match after all. Mrs. Bootle's 5 ft. 9 ins. and the man's a shrimp, only 5 ft. 4 ins. Perhaps she won't mind. We'll call him 'medium.' He's got the sort of figure she wants and income, same religion and everything.

Heather: . . . In fact he's got more income than she's asked for. Maybe that'll cancel the height. Very good income for now, £2,000. Does he live in the country?

Mary: Yes, that's all right. He's retired and stuck there for life with the sort of house he'll never sell. By the way, she's a bit bossy, Heather. What will she be like with a small man? She'll probably kill him in two days. I'm sure she ought to have a tall one towering above her with a very loud voice to keep her down.

Heather: Oh, now, Mary, you know it's always worked if we've put the bossy ones with the quiet ones. Let's introduce them.

Mary: I shall cry if I don't find my grey hat. Anyway, Mrs. Bootle's got her first man. We're doing her well starting her off with £2,000.

Heather: Now for the next one. Mrs. Lime—my dear, she's not awfully gay. I suppose she's still feeling her widowhood.

Mary: What a pity—because I thought Carter would do for her, but he says he wants somebody to cheer him up. They do seem to have a lot in common—he's sixty-eight and she wants someone about sixty-five. They both love music, travelling, motoring and home life. And, my dear, he even likes photography, which she does. . . .

Heather: . . . and they live near each other, which is half the battle before they meet. I don't think she's so bad, and once she got married again it might make a new woman of her.

Mary: Yes—she's sympathetic, and I don't think she'd be too difficult to live with. Anyway, they'll soon tell us if they don't like each other. Heather, do you know anything about Eileen Scales?

Heather: Hasn't she been on rather a long time? Very attractive-looking?

Mary: No, I think she's new. Yes—she is new. No objection to widower with children, especially young ones. You know, I think, secretly, she's madly keen on children, and she'd rather like the widower because she would be so disappointed if she couldn't have any herself.

Heather: Couldn't she have Mr. Brown?

Mary: Yes, good old Mr. Brown. He's so sweet and he's quite lost with those children of five and six. They both live in Suffolk and they're both fond of

dogs. They must be soul-mates. He has £800 a year and she wants £800. He's forty-five and she's thirty-two. He wants someone with a pleasant face and hers is quite cheerful and sweet. That's another match—we hope.

Heather: Certain ones get stuck for no reason at all.

Mary: Can I have the Black Book, Heather?

Heather: Who are you looking for?

Mary: I'm looking for someone who lives in the same hunting county as Miss Barrington-Smythe. Heather, what are we to do? She's had five men already this week.

Heather: Well, you know why she scares them away.

Mary: Why—what's her line?

Heather: Thought-reading. She's very bad at it.

Mary: Well, she'd better have Mr. Vincent. Good lord, no, he's only a half-gent and she *must* have a gent.

Heather: Violet Grey, a lady's maid. She's lady's maid to Lady ——. She says: 'Don't worry, I quite realize it's no easy task for you, so please take your time.'

Mary: There's Page the butler. And ladies' maids and butlers do get on well.

Heather: Yes, let's try him. She's terribly nice, isn't she, Mary? She's a sweet woman.

Mary: Well, he's nice, too. But wait a moment, how far is Nottingham from Coventry?

Heather: I'll look on the map. There it is. It's about forty-five miles.

Mary: Oh, good. They can easily nip over and see each other. That's Violet, off with her butler.

Heather: Mary—this baker with £500 a year, who wants someone 'nicely curved.' There's Mary Martin, who calls herself 'medium,' which is bound to be plump.

Mary: I'm looking her up. Oh, dear, he's only half an

inch taller than she is, but I suppose that'll be all right if she wears low heels the first time she goes out with him, because he's got an inferiority complex. You remember her, she's an awfully enthusiastic sort of person and I do believe she would help him to get rid of that inferiority complex.

Heather: I think she might.

Mary: Can I have the Black Book, please—Heather, we've got to find someone for Joan Spinks whose father's a retired greengrocer—you remember, that nurse of twenty-eight—quite pretty.

Heather: Oh, send her Mr. Halesham. He's screaming for someone of twenty-eight.

Mary: No, he won't do. He isn't dapper enough and her idol must be dapper. Where's the box of C. Men? Let's look up Cullen. I think he's the man for her. Yes—she might like him. Now in the Air Force, and was something to do with bananas.

Heather: Yes, my dear. Bananas has just the right money she wants.

Mary: . . . and she wants 'a refined home lover.' Let me see, he says he's fond of boxing. Would that help about the house? Also debating—rather dangerous. But he's fond of music and children, which she is, and they both want somebody with a sense of humour.

Heather: Bananas is nice. I thought he was gentle and kind when I saw him, and he certainly had a sense of humour. I think they might click, don't you?

Mary: Now for Mrs. Rocksmith, who's swathed in mink from top to bottom—jewels sparkling when she walks into the office. We've just married her daughter to a baronet's son. Now Ma is trying her luck.

Heather: Shall we try her with Major Toptown?

Mary: Yes, she's just the girl for him. She wants to live in the country and he's a landowner. And keep her flat on in town.

Heather: Would he like the flat? Did you see it?

Mary: Not bad—a bit ornate. He *can* afford it on top of the land. He's an M.F.H. and she likes that sort of thing. She'd be a good hostess and she wouldn't worry him too much. I think we might have a wedding there soon. He says here he's got a stately figure, which means portly, but she doesn't seem to mind about figure.

Heather: Mary, *what* are we to do with Elizabeth Green?

Mary: She's had about twenty-four people now.

Heather: Yes, she never takes the trouble to answer their letters or remember their names.

Mary: She writes about a month later, by which time we've given them someone else. Why she ever joined I can't think.

Heather: Waste of stamps on all sides.

Mary: Let's take a deep plunge and do a Jewess. Where's the box of Jews? And the Black Book. . . .

Heather: Who she's going to have I can't think. All this chi-chi about the girl not knowing she's on the books is so embarrassing for the young men.

Mary: You mean about their being vetted by father first?

Heather: . . . yes, do you realize, my dear, they go through three examiners before they even see the girl—the secretary, the governess, and papa. Shall we see if Mr. Black can pass all the tests?

Mary: That's not a bad idea.

At this point the secretary announced a visitor for me—we can never carry on long uninterrupted—so I laid down

the Jewish father's last letter and went over to the mirror on the wall to tidy my rumpled hair, before I left Heather to go on 'mating' alone.

I came into the interviewing room to find a middle-aged Army officer studying the Victorian flowers with a great deal of intensity. He was a new client and he looked surprised when I appeared.

People so often look astonished when they see us that we always long to ask them what sort of person they expected to see. Perhaps they think we will both be old and rather eccentric-looking. Fortunately it doesn't seem to put them off to find two perfectly normal-looking young girls, though I often wonder if we should do better if we wore white wigs as we have to receive the confidences of people sometimes twice our age.

The Army man had already written for particulars, and now he wanted to talk over his marriage and register with the Bureau.

I do not know why people make such heavy weather over filling in forms, but they all do. "What shall I put for so-and-so?" they ask us frequently, as though we know more about them than they do themselves.

We often long to adopt the crude technique of a harassed civil servant in a post office or labour exchange and tell them curtly to "go over there and fill it up." But, of course, we have to be very patient and sympathetic however pressed we are for time, as our clients' matrimonial affairs are none the less personal for being put on a business footing.

This man must have filled in plenty of forms to join the Army alone, but he seemed to want assistance over nearly all the items.

"What shall I put for 'Colour of Hair'?" he asked gravely, raising a very bald head.

As almost all our women say they must marry a man with a sense of humour, I was rather pleased because I thought this must be an attempt at a joke. I was just going

to laugh uproariously when I realized the gravity was genuine and that he could not have a spark of humour.

"Put fair," I said solemnly, looking hard at his bushy eyebrows.

And I realized that the dice were loaded against him--not only on account of his bald head.

Chapter XI

Extracts from letters

HERE ARE SOME EXTRACTS FROM SOME OF THE LETTERS received by the Marriage Bureau which we reproduce without comment:

‘I want to marry a gentleman or a clergyman.’

‘Above all things my correspondent must be a GENUINE animal lover. This is most important, for without it there would be no peace. I am a Catholic (not a nun).’

From a dentist:

‘I have no particular ideas as to how my future wife should be, but I do make this one stipulation. She must have false teeth—I am forced to give enough benefit to my family.’

‘The other day I was watching a facial demonstration, so thought perhaps this would help to improve my looks. After having my face pulled about for twenty minutes I got up to go. The girl who had performed the operation went away to get my change, and another attendant came up to me, and to the amusement of all who had been watching me said: “Can we give you one of our facials, madam?”’

‘This, Miss Oliver, will give you an idea of my looks.’

From a prominent Member of Parliament:

‘My future wife must be intelligent but uninformed.’

‘I do not want a husband who will be attached to an

odoriferous pipe, and who finds the mantelpiece more comfortable than either a footstool or slippers.'

The most popular phrase:

'I am considered good-looking.'

'I want to marry a man with melting violet eyes.'

'I am what people call "a gay young widow." I have been happily married three times, and all my husbands have passed peacefully away. My first husband was a grocer, my second an egg merchant and my third a butcher. As I am now thoroughly used to these three occupations, I would like my next husband to earn his living in one of these lines.

'I am attractive with plenty of sex-appeal. . . . Everyone believes I am about twenty-four, but really I am forty-three. . . . It should not be difficult to find me another partner. . . . Of course, he must be good-looking and not fat, but tall and strong (like my late butcher husband). . . . As all my husbands were fond of a merry and carefree life I want to go on living that kind of life because I know this would be their wishes. Besides, I am too young to settle down to a quiet home with children.

'I think that is all I can say about myself, except that I have a good figure and was Miss Margate in 19—. I was chosen from 400 girls and some of them were beautiful, but I am modest and do not believe in having a good opinion of oneself.'

From one client to another:

'Dear Mr. —,

' . . . I liked you but I feel I must be frank and tell you I could never marry you. First, you have so little hair; that puts me off a little. . . . I am also used to gentlemen who

wear dark suits when they take a lady out. I had on my best hat and coat in honour of you.

'P.S.—About your hair, don't worry about it; there are many things you can rub in to make it grow again.'

From a boy of 19:

'My mother says I should not contemplate marriage until I am twenty-two years old, but I should like to court two or three years before we marry.'

'I am unable to reply to quite a number of your clients because

their name is illegible;

their address is illegible;

their letters are signed with Christian name only;

they give no address.'

'Dear Miss Jenner,

'Thanks for the introduction which I feel I must return. Years ago I was engaged to a girl who was keen on dogs. In the end the dogs got her undivided attention, so the liaison was eventually broken off.'

'I find that women show a most delightful impartiality between fantasy and fact. Thus, a Botticelli in description becomes a plump Rubens in photo form.'

'Have kept a gin-soaked bawd for other men's diversion all my life, and am at last to be allowed my divorce. Am wondering what may now be possible.

'Neighbours tender me their decrepit relatives. Varicose veins map their silk stockings and make it imperative for them to find an easier post. I explore all these tenders for any points of contact and discover nothing. Nothing is there but conceit by which they live. And I have an inferiority complex.'

‘Have you any husbands to spare for the North? (middle-aged).’

From a man:

‘I stand 6 ft. 2 ins. and could pose for a sculptor. I swim a mile non-stop, skate fifteen, and drive 360—petrol permitting. But these things do not defraud the clock.

‘I have a three-bedroomed suburban house with professional neighbours. . . .’

‘The lady who would care to write to me with a view to matrimony in the near future must be willing to live on Public Assistance.’

‘The following experiences will show that it is really a case of patience and going on until the right one turns up:

‘Now Miss X of Epping, appointment made, kept me in an afternoon and did not turn up, not a word of explanation.

‘Miss X, Kennington, an Australian girl. Big girl, large features, motherly and very plain. Spent lunch hour, had to be polite and gentlemanly and, note the joke, she did not like me. What a relief to me.

‘Miss X of Harrow. Long correspondence, exchanged photos, made appointment, kept me standing on a cold corner 30 minutes, did not turn up. Two days later received post card saying could not come. Date on p.c. same date as appointment (how honourable).

‘Mrs. C. of Palace Hotel, several conversations on telephone, appointment at the Trocadero, waited 30 minutes, page boy brings message lady finds it inconvenient to come.

‘Well, there you are, so now if you think it’s worth while and you have some more promising material we will go merrily on.’

‘If you think my offer is redickilos, scrap it.’

'I have the patience of a fisherman and a photographer. Fussy unless I get plain food punctually.'

'I do rather deplore having to write to you as I had hoped to meet someone nice before, but have been strictly brought up.'

'I have had two boy friends since I was twenty-five years. The first one was when I was twenty-five years old and we had a small quarrel and somehow the friendship cooled off, and the second was when I was thirty-five and after we had been friendly for some months he told me that his wife was still alive.'

'Should there be any client upon your books willing to guarantee my mother's normal comfort for the residue of her days . . . I should be willing to marry the lady.'

'My relations are members of the House of Lords.'

'It is only just this arithmetical trouble, and both my solicitor and the bank manager say my reason is not otherwise affected. The solicitor says he has also met with similar cases.'

'I have been engaged before. The last time was just before I went to S.W. Africa. But I was so keen about the job in the desert that I did not notice how the months were passing and finally came out of it to find that she had discovered someone else.'

'I am more concerned with what is under the hat than with the hat. . . . I can tolerate more easily a person who occasionally gets into a hell of a temper than I can a semi-animate doormat. . . . I can swear like hell when necessary—and, so I am told, when unnecessary.'

Chapter XII

The Branch in the country—Marriage Bureau gives bonus of £50 a baby—Judging a baby show at a provincial town—A more successful country branch—War-time boom in weddings—R.A.F. weddings

HEATHER AND I WERE MOTORING ALONG A COUNTRY ROAD in the direction of Aldershot one week-end at the beginning of September, 1939. Like everyone else with a business of any kind we were very preoccupied with how we should run the Marriage Bureau in war-time.

"Anyway, Mary, if this week's a good omen the war is obviously going to make everyone want to get married."

"Yes, but supposing they bomb London and our office gets flattened with all our papers and records in it. Then where would we be?"

"We ought to have a second office in another street, with everything duplicated."

"That might get flattened too."

"Perhaps."

"Heather, I know, couldn't we have a country branch?"

"Is it worth it?"

"Yes, because to make it pay for itself, we could have it as a guest house and country branch combined. And we could offer rooms to our newly married couples who get married in war-time and don't want to set up house till the war's over."

"It's an idea, but where could we have it?"

"Round here. There must be heaps of wives who want

to live near Aldershot now their husbands are in the Army."

" . . . And lots of Army husbands who don't want to live in their quarters. Mary, it's *quite* an idea."

And while we were thinking it over in silence we came across a house agent's board looking over the top of a high wall. Not an old dusty board that was bowing from its post, but a brand-new one, very smart and erect, suggesting the house had only just been left empty.

"Let's look at it," I said, while Heather stopped the car and reversed towards the gates. They were immense wrought-iron ones with a lodge each side of them. The lodges were evidently occupied, but nobody came out when we blew our horn, so we opened the gates ourselves.

It was a long drive, and when we got to the front door we found it was also made of regal patterned wrought-iron and nearly as large as the gateway. The house was a big grey stone building, with two turrets, rather like a Scottish laird's castle, and we were not prepared for the atmosphere of old Madrid in the interior.

A pleasant-looking plump housekeeper in a stiff white overall opened the door and showed us into a high marble hall with pillars, huge Spanish chests and lovely old Spanish high-backed velvet chairs. We noticed the doors bore impressive emblems, richly carved, and the windows in the ballroom had stained-glass emblems near the top.

From the housekeeper we learned that it belonged to an exiled foreign sovereign who had now decided to let it furnished for the duration.

We were so carried away by the sovereign's mansion that we forgot to ask how many bedrooms there were and how many servants it needed. I think the only thing we asked was the rent, and that; in our fever of delight, seemed reasonable. All we looked at was the ballroom, the library and the hall. And in the course of seeing that area we came across a quantity of precious Persian rugs and three grand pianos, which helped to turn our heads a bit more.

Probably the housekeeper thought we were merely making an easy escape when we waved aside all idea of seeing the rest of the house and asked her not to let it to anyone else as we would be getting in touch with the agents at once. Anyway, she took it quite calmly and showed us out with a respectful little bow, and we drove home like mad things, full of excitement and in our imagination filling the house with visitors, who would pay enormous sums to live in the romantic atmosphere of the old Spanish chests.

We could hardly wait till the next day, when we went to see the agents. They presented us with a long printed description of the house, with photographs that fanned our excitement, and from which we learned that it had twenty-five bedrooms and nearly as many bathrooms, besides twenty-three acres of land. This was news to us, but if we thought anything at all we merely thought it was an even better bargain. And we asked to see the lease.

Perhaps nearly everybody did something crazy at the outbreak of war. We certainly indulged in a strange piece of madness the day we took the sovereign's house for the duration, and having paid our rent for three months, went home to pack all our belongings.

We packed most of the night, including all our clothes and the office files, and in the morning we drove down to our country branch, taking two car-loads of luggage and two secretaries.

It was a strange cavalcade that sped down the Aldershot road, with boxes of stationery, dismembered filing cabinets and bundles of documents blotting out the entire back windows of both the cars, and a few precious things from our flat crowning them unsteadily or pushed into odd corners.

When we arrived the housekeeper looked as though she firmly believed she was dreaming. And it was difficult to get out of such oddly loaded cars with dignity, but we did our best.

"But where are the servants?" she asked, with bulging

eyes, when we each emerged gingerly from the two driving seats.

"We've brought two secretaries."

Heather said this as though they were better than a whole retinue of servants, while the secretaries looked rather glum.

Then we went to choose our bedrooms. We walked for what seemed miles along corridors and looked into palatial rooms with big four-poster beds and velvet hangings. They had accompanying marble bathrooms, formal groups of leather-bound books by each bed and elaborate writing-tables in every room.

The place had the kind of nameless smell that usually pervades houses or rooms of defunct celebrities that have been preserved furnished as national monuments. I suppose it was really because they were afraid of opening the windows in case it faded the velvet.

In our tour we discovered that each turret had a complete small private suite inside it, so we decided to occupy these and leave the other rooms for the guests.

Then with sinking hearts we went into the servant question, and found there were only four installed in the house while it was empty, while it needed fifteen when it was fully occupied. The housekeeper was quite capable, though we suspected she had hoped the house would never be taken, and the 'tweeny' who had stayed on was very good. But we hate to dwell on the memory of the mysterious 'sisters' who were also part of the sovereign's skeleton staff.

Neither of us could discover what their original duties were. But in our time they occupied a room in the servants' wing from which they never once emerged to do a stroke of work. If we sent a message saying we wanted to see them to tell them their duties we always received word that the eldest had 'rheumatics' (which we suspected had their source in a bottle). Or else her sister's inside had 'turned right over.' In fact her inside unfailingly took a somersault when we suggested she should do any work. Unfortunately

they were let with the house, along with its more elegant furnishings, and we could not turn them out.

Nothing chilled our enthusiasm that first day, for we thought both guests and servants would flock to the house. But when we tried to amplify our staff the only result from a thorough combing of the neighbourhood was a cook who, it transpired, could hardly cook at all.

Then we turned our attention to the more enthralling task of finding the guests. We made the secretaries spend several days typing out circulars about the house and polishing the ballroom floor. Meanwhile we tried to help with the housework ourselves, if only to keep the house clean, and Heather and I would dictate letters to clients while we dusted the carved furniture.

We rode round Aldershot on bicycles, distributing the circulars. We expected a deluge of requests for rooms, and felt very, very worried about our meagre staff.

After a long, discouraging silence the only response came from an elderly Colonel, who rang up and asked what we charged for a single room.

"Six guineas," I replied cheerfully.

"Too much. I'll pay four—move in to-morrow."

And he rang off without waiting to hear if we agreed to his offer, so we decided to put him in the attic. He sounded so testy we thought he must have quarrelled with his wife that morning and was leaving home in a rage. Either that or else he had a pretty bad liver.

There was no bed in the attic we chose for him, so we got a collapsible iron bedstead that we found in a box-room and fitted it together as best we could, trapping our fingers painfully in the process. It did not look right somehow, after all our trouble, but we made up the bed and hoped for the best.

That night, when the Colonel had gone to rest after a very indigestible dinner cooked by our inferior cook, we heard a loud bang and clatter, followed by some angry barrack-room oaths.

He left before breakfast next morning, without paying for his night's lodging, and leaving a collapsed iron bedstead lying in pieces on the floor in silent evidence of his complaint.

A whole fortnight passed before we had another inquiry for rooms, and that came from a woman who rang up to know what we could charge for herself and her maid.

"Too much," she said when we told her, and vanished from the line before we could lower our fees.

Meanwhile the September sunshine was waning and we felt cold in the turrets at night. So we made a few tentative inquiries from the housekeeper and found the house burned a ton of coal a week, besides an equally alarming quantity of coke for the central heating. It appeared we should have to forgo the heating and shiver—at least until the house was filled with guests, which we were now beginning to suspect would never happen.

By October we had to go about the house in fur coats, and our zealous efforts with the carpet sweeper were purely to get warm. Then, as there were still no guests at all, we moved thankfully back to Town, and tried to think how we could get rid of the sovereign's mansion as quickly as possible.

The next event, after we abandoned our disastrous 'country branch,' was when we offered a bonus of £50 a baby to all our clients who were in the fighting forces. The announcement was closely followed by a letter we received from a Colonel, whose wife had just given birth to twins. So we parted sadly with £100, and now, while we still give the bonus, we are insured against twins for the future.

Before this our enthusiasm for babies had been rather weakened since the day Heather and I had to go and judge a baby show in the Home Counties. It was our first public appearance and we went down to it dressed immaculately in the smartest all-white outfits we could have made, hoping we would make a great impression and be a good advertisement for the Marriage Bureau.

When we arrived we found it was being held in a large

meadow outside the town, where there was a fair going on as well, attended by a raffish Saturday afternoon crowd of holiday-makers.

Part of the meadow was roped off for the baby show, and the first impression we got was that they had not roped off a wide enough area. All the mothers for miles round with babies under a year seemed to have brought their offspring for the competition. They had also brought their other children who could not be left at home, which added to the noise and confusion as they kept running out of sight while the mothers were hushing the infants, and then had to be rounded up vocally.

We were received on a big wooden platform draped in Union Jacks, and greeted royally by the Lord Mayor in his chains and an enormous Lady Mayoress. It was a sweltering hot July afternoon and she wore black satin and silver foxes, which was probably her platform regalia for all the seasons. Then we shook hands with the aldermen, and one or two determined middle-aged women with parasols who were variously connected with the Women's Institute and child welfare committees. And we were presented with bouquets of rambler roses by a little girl with long sausage curls.

After this we sat in state on kitchen chairs arranged in a stiff semicircle on the platform, beneath the full glare of the afternoon sun. Before us stretched a vague sea of perspiring faces and rocking arms, while we tried to exchange platitudes with the aldermen above the fretful cries of all the infants who were already weary of the whole business.

We were just beginning to feel particularly stupid when the Lord Mayor scraped back his chair and rose majestically to his feet. Then he took a step forward to be nearer the microphone and began his opening speech. It was very short, and when he came to his last line where he declared the show open, he took yet another step forward to get the best out of that microphone and drown all the screaming babies.

Nobody could have divined how the platform was supported, because the Union Jacks hid all its weaknesses. So when the Mayor took his last step forward and upset the balance it came as a surprise to everyone.

Suddenly the whole platform tilted, and then crashed to the ground in chaotic divisions of woodwork. The kitchen chairs fell backwards and overturned, and we were all flung in a disorderly heap among the wreckage. I remember sitting up to find my chic white hat over one eye, while with the other eye I discerned a hummock of black satin and the tail of a silver fox, which I recognized must be part of the Lady Mayoress.

Of course, the mothers were tittering with ill-concealed laughter, and there was considerable delay while we were all sorted out of the woodwork and Union Jacks and asked if we were hurt. Heather and I discovered our virginal white outfits were looking rather the worse for the episode, and we felt we should no longer make the great impression we had hoped. Otherwise, beyond having to straighten themselves, nobody had suffered any injury, and the judging went on as planned.

Neither of us knew anything about babies and they all looked very much alike to us. In the first round we chose out the cleanest because we were expected to pick them up and hold them in our arms.

On the way we were followed round and prompted by the local district nurse and the Lady Mayoress. When a baby was chosen they made a point of saying "Goody! goody! goody!" to the babies nearby and smiling at the mothers, I suppose to stop the latter being offended. So we said "Goody! goody! goody!" to the disqualified infants and smiled at the mothers, too.

Then there was a still more wearisome session in a tent where the runners-up were stripped and weighed, most of them yelling loudly in protest and not looking their best. And after one of the longest, noisiest and hottest afternoons we have ever experienced we drove back to Town, feeling

that our first public appearance had not assisted the fame of the Marriage Bureau in a very impressive manner.

After our experience with the mansion near Aldershot we thought no more about having a country branch until the first air-raids began on London. But when one or two familiar landmarks in Bond Street had been levelled to a heap of rubble we went down to Maidenhead and took two office rooms over a firm of insurance agents in the High Street.

Those two rooms are now our permanent country branch, and its main purpose is to house a complete duplicate of all our records and correspondence.

As we are so busy in London, we only open the Maidenhead office two days a week. But in spite of this we have had several marriages already, one of them being the wedding of a smart Bond Street dress designer who evacuated there and married a well-to-do local man with an attractive house on the river. She still keeps up her dress designing and it has turned out a very successful match.

In London the war brought us a deluge of new clients from all over the country, and we soon discovered that many more people wanted to get married in war-time than in peace-time.

In the first few weeks of war we suddenly found the number of people already on our books had increased by a quarter. But instead of being delighted at what might have been called a boom in marriages we became extremely anxious on remembering all the stories we had heard about disastrous 'war weddings' in the last war. So we spent our time saying: "Don't be in too much of a hurry. Think it over well first. Don't get married too hastily——" until all the couples must have thought we were dreadfully damping and tiresome.

We found the men wanted to get married so that when they went away to fight they had 'something to come back

to.' And the women wanted to marry quickly because they were afraid of being left without a man at the end of the war, when so many of the men might have been killed. They did not say this in so many words, as naturally they did not wish to look like chickens running after grain. But from little things they said it was plain they were thinking of all the old maids there were after the last war when there were so many superfluous women.

More men seem to want to have children in war-time, but fewer women want them—which is not surprising when they have to look after them alone in as much if not more danger than the husband who is in the Services. The men generally say they want them to perpetuate their name, which seems more important to them than either the sort of life the child is going to have either in war-time or immediately after it.

We find very few of the couples want to set up a home of their own in war-time. Many of the girls get married and then go back and live with their parents again. And we have had several R.A.F. men who have specifically asked to meet a girl who could go on living with her parents. I suppose they feel happier about her if she is with somebody, in case they should get killed flying.

We have had applications from hundreds of Australian and Canadian soldiers who want to marry English girls while they are over here, and we found the Australians in particular went like hot cakes early in the war.

The girls were very keen to marry them because they said they found them sincere, and thought their bluntness was refreshing. Above all, they wanted to go and live in Australia after the war; we imagine because they felt it would not be feeling the after-effects as much as this country, besides being far away from the scene of the air-raids.

The Australians invariably had the same system of approaching us. Usually the one who wanted to come on the books would bring a friend and make him do all the talking. The friend would tell us how he thought his pal

really ought to get fixed up with a wife while he was in England, and what a wonderful fellow he was and how lucky the girl would be who married him. Altogether a tremendous amount of back-slapping went on, and then we would get down to details in a very breezy manner (they always infected us with their breeziness as well) before we set things going for them. They were fun, those Australians, and we liked dealing with them.

When the girl client met her Australian she probably met him in the Overseas Club. And she very likely saw another Australian soldier sitting almost within earshot. - But she probably thought nothing of it because there were bound to be plenty of Australian soldiers sitting about the Club anyway.

That soldier was the friend again. This time he had been asked to hang round and take a look at the girl, and if he passed her she was definitely 'on,' for the time being at any rate.

A very touching romance we sponsored at this time was the one between a young man in the Australian Navy and a girl who used to be his childhood love when he was ten years old. He was born in England, but went out to Australia to work when he left school, so when war broke out he joined the Australian Navy and got sent back to this country.

Through us he met the girl who lived next door to him in England, and they were so delighted at meeting again they got engaged almost at once. Apparently when they were small they used to write notes to each other and push them underneath the garden fence, and then be very coy and pretend not to see them.

The Australians and Canadians all said they liked listening to English girls' voices. Of course, now that most of them have been in England some while and are getting to know people, we do not have anything like the influx of Colonial forces we did at first. But we still get quite a number all the time, especially when a new division have just been sent over.

In the first few months of war most of our Service clients were in the Army, next in number came the Navy and less than half were in the R.A.F. This was very harassing for us, as the R.A.F. are far more in demand than either of the other Services. The Navy still seem very popular, but the R.A.F. have outstripped them by a long way. In fact, ever since war began this has been our permanent headache, because every other letter nowadays seems to have the phrase: 'I want to meet someone in the R.A.F.'

This is generally sheer hero-worship on the part of the women, and we often wonder how the R.A.F. marriages will work out, not so much during the war as after it, when the heroes come down from the sky to a black suit and an office.

Meanwhile these young men make wonderful husbands, not because of their deeds of heroism, of which the average pilot's wife says she hears little or nothing, but because of their outlook.

Life and its purpose are like a clear-cut crystal which they are holding up to the light without anything fogging its surface. It is a beautiful thing, cut on very simple lines and inspiring them all the time.

Their emotions are fewer and finer, and they have the best sense of proportion in the world. You cannot fight 1941 air battles and have a mind for petty quarrels and disturbances.

One pilot told me that when he first started to fly he was unhappy and worried by human problems, which at once seemed infinitely small and stupid directly he was ten thousand feet above the world. When he was training to be a fighter pilot it took such a degree of concentration in those fast machines that it completely blotted out all his worries. And when he came down to earth again he found them not seeming anything like as formidable as before.

We are afraid of two things in the hero-worshipping wives. One is that they may expect every short leave to be a dazzling celebration—whereas relaxation to the average

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pilot probably means doing something ordinary and dull, like pulling a motor-car to pieces in the back yard.

The other is that they may nearly suffocate him with mothering, which is what hero-worship frequently turns to once they are married. Men hate being followed round with scarves and overcoats. The only thing for a wife to do is to leave the extra pullover laid out with his clothes for him to take or not if he chooses. He is much more likely to put it on. And metaphorically this applies whenever she wants to get her own way.

Sometimes the war bride may have to do a little mothering, but she has to hide her maternal capacities very carefully, because a man hates to see the wheels going round. He cannot bear being fussed and bothered over little things, which is merely exhausting to him. Neither can he stand the complicated web of emotions over small matters that so many women weave round their unfortunate husbands. Women can usually take a lesson from men with their sensible, simple outlook and better sense of proportion.

And so to all future pilots' wives we would say, try and have a sense of proportion like his, see life like the clear-cut crystal he sees it and let all his landings be happy ones.

Fortunately the glamour of the R.A.F. extends to officers and men who are not pilots but are in the Intelligence or ground staff. So the crisis over Air Force husbands is not as bad as it might be.

I think our most eventful Air Force wedding was when a good-looking, buxom munition girl married an aircraftsman in a village in Somerset. We had a letter from the mother saying: 'It all went off very well, only Jack (the bridegroom) was a bit busy that morning, and poor Lucy (the bride) had to go and fetch him.'

We were rather mystified about the bridegroom being 'a bit busy,' and subsequent inquiries from another client who had been at the wedding unearthed the whole startling story.

Apparently there was quite a flutter at the village church with all the village packed inside and everyone ready with

bags of rice and confetti. The bride was in a beautiful white bridal dress, waiting in the porch, while the organist played all the voluntaries he knew. But no bridegroom or best man were to be seen waiting by the nave.

People shuffled their feet and tried not to look as if they were endeavouring to peer into the vestry, and the organist played the first voluntary again. Then he decided the bridegroom must be brought out of hiding somehow, and that this was the psychological moment to strike up 'Here Comes the Bride.' But it was a most unfortunate gamble as the bridegroom was not in the vestry or anywhere near the church.

At this point most brides would have beaten a retreat in a darkened motor car. But our munition girl turned and fled into the churchyard, not, as one might imagine, in tearful hysterics, but merely to grab a bicycle from a number that were leaning against the wall. Then she got on it quite calmly and cheerfully, looped her veil over the handlebars, and rode lustily for the Air Force quarters.

The sentries were astonished at having to stop a determined young woman on a bicycle in a flowing veil and wedding dress, who inquired for the aircraftman. And when he was brought to the gates she hustled him off to the church.

Chapter XIII

More about war weddings—Millionaire wants a son-in-law to inherit his business—Trying tricks of clients—Mary Oliver goes to see the family of a client who is being difficult

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT BOTH COUPLES AND THEIR PARENTS seem scared about in a war marriage is that probably they can only see so little of each other, even after they are married.

It always makes me think of a girl I know very well who is both happily married and working for her living. At one time she even had to stay away at work several evenings a week, and when her employer called her up and said: "I do hope we're not breaking up your home," she replied, simply: "I'd so much rather my husband saw too little of me than too much."

Funnily enough, so few wives have the intelligence to imagine that perhaps the most devoted husbands may not want to see too much of them. And it is up to the wife to be the elusive one—not, of course, to neglect his creature comforts and the smooth-working wheels of his home. But to arrange the home with changes and progress in it, and not so that she is sitting in his pocket day in, day out, for years and years. He will appreciate her much more if he has a few opportunities of missing her.

One sees so many married couples eating a meal in public, just like automatons, quite wordless and expressionless. You see the same couple everywhere in different forms, in smart restaurants, sitting side by side in the bus or going for walks—always the same, till one wonders why they bother to go about together at all.

War has done a great deal in bringing much-needed change into some of these homes—drastic tearing change in some cases, but it has stirred the dust of years and let people see things more clearly—monotony has vanished.

The result has been mercurial in some instances and I have noticed that many people take on a new lease of life.

And so, when anxious parents come to me and say: “But they’ve only met a few times, they can’t possibly know each other well enough. And then he’s going to sea and may not get leave for a long time,” I would sometimes suggest: “Perhaps it’s better than knowing each other too well.”

Part of the influx of clients we had early in the war consisted of women to whom it suddenly became a matter of great urgency that they should acquire British nationality. And of course the quickest, easiest method was marriage to an Englishman. So they came tripping to the Marriage Bureau and filled in their forms.

But we were prepared for this, and the forms went to Scotland Yard, for we were naturally anxious not to fix up a loyal British citizen with a Fifth Column bride.

We are still just as careful, and for safety we do not take on any foreigners in war-time, sending back all the fees that come in with the applications.

We have no idea how many of these women actually turned out to be spies, as once we sent their forms to Scotland Yard they were out of our hands, but I believe we helped incidentally to round up a few who were better interned.

Just about this time a tall blonde Italian girl went boldly round England saying she would give £500 to anybody who would marry her. Eventually she secured a feckless young farmer for £350, after which she was interned. Her little unofficial publicity campaign for a husband put us in a difficult position, as for some unknown reason a number of people thought we must have brought off the match and rang us up to ask if we had. Naturally this annoyed us all the more just when it was exactly the sort of marriage we

were taking such trouble to see never originated through the Marriage Bureau.

The drawback to the necessarily confidential nature of our work means that we have to keep our heads through the most complicated intrigues created by clients who do not want their friends and relations to know they are having dealings with us.

War has increased these particular difficulties as Service people are often afraid of letters getting into the hands of their superior officers, again because they are terrified of being laughed at. There is one young officer who makes me sign my letters 'Auntie Gwen,' and put in a lot of family chatter. All the girls I suggest to him have to be referred to as though I have just met them at a party, and that as they live near where he is stationed I think he ought to meet them. And of course kind old Auntie gives their address.

We had one woman who lived with her two sisters and was convinced they held her letters over the kettle before she came down to breakfast. 'Please see your letter is *well stuck down*,' she used to repeat several times, heavily underlined, every time she wrote—until we put her mind at rest by using sealing wax.

Among our recent clients was a man with a big business who was trying to find a son-in-law qualified to inherit the family firm and look after it when the old man died. This way he felt his daughter's husband would have a safe job for life. He did not tell the daughter he was putting her on our books, and when I said I should have to meet her first before I could do anything he arranged for me to run into him 'by chance' at the Dorchester. I was to walk past their lunch-table and suddenly recognize him (we were supposed to have met in Italy), when he would introduce me (not under my own name) and invite me to a cocktail party. When I came to the party I was to bring a young man (the suggested son-in-law) and then find I had to go early, leaving him behind.

I suppose the old man was frightened the daughter might fall in love with somebody who would not have enough brains for the particular family business. In any case, he was afraid she might get difficult if she guessed that he was choosing her husband for her.

At the moment we are still looking for the right young man, for there is the double problem of finding somebody capable of taking on the business as well as being an attractive husband.

This same old man annoyed us by giving himself another name when he applied to us. We found out his real name quite easily, for, besides being a millionaire, he is well known and very influential. But we felt rather vexed at his deception for it stands to reason that we must know something about our clients, and it only adds to our work if they give us a false name.

Another mild deception on the part of some of our men clients is for them to pretend to the girls we introduce them to that Heather and I are personal friends of theirs. This is usually after they have taken one of us out to lunch to talk over their projected marriage.

Of course, the girls get angry and think we are trying to get them off with our friends. And then we have to ring up the men and ask them to stop doing it. We have to tell them that our going out to lunch with them was purely a business meeting, and that they must not try and make it into a personal friendship to impress the girls, because it has quite the wrong effect. All of which is very awkward to explain and a great nuisance.

One can quite see how easily they may fall into doing it accidentally, because after all the Marriage Bureau is probably the only common ground they have until they can get their mutual conversation adjusted.

When we are out in the evening or during the day, and clients walk into the same restaurant, Heather and I never recognize them unless they come over and speak to us—again because of this business of many people wanting to

keep it a secret that they are on the books of the Marriage Bureau.

The ironical reflection of all this is that sometimes our own friends refuse to invite us to their weddings in case it should be thought we had fixed it up for them. Sometimes, when we are feeling mischievous, we threaten to avenge ourselves by appearing, very conspicuously, with bags of rice and confetti, and dropping pamphlets about the Marriage Bureau as we scramble into our pews.

The rather entangled process of trying to remember all the variations of plots for secrecy in the matrimonial affairs of several thousand clients can easily be imagined as one of the hardest parts of our role—whose parents are supposed to know, and whose are not, in which case how they are supposed to have met. What we may say in a letter, and how we must deal with an inquisitive relation.

Now and again we have nearly made a mistake, but managed to retrieve ourselves by saying we had two clients with the same name and got confused.

One girl who came on the books and got engaged soon afterwards to a very suitable young man, forgot she had not told her parents, and suddenly let out by accident that she met her fiancé through the Marriage Bureau.

This happened long after we felt we had established our integrity, and that there would be no more raised eyebrows and wild conclusions that the Marriage Bureau must be something very sinister if only because it was new. Therefore it was all the more wearisome to us when the girl rang up and said her parents were very angry over her engagement since they heard how she met the young man, and would we do something about it to calm them down.

I promised her I would go down and see them as it seemed the only thing to do, and next morning I put on my tweed suit and flat shoes and took a train down to Gloucestershire.

If they had not lived so far away, and been so incon-

veniently placed sixteen miles from a station, where the only taxi-driver was away tending his vegetable garden when my train got in, I might not have minded so much. As it was I could only think sadly of all the work I would have to make up in the office the following day.

I was still thinking of it when I walked through a conventional country hall with a large dinner-gong at the bottom of the stairs and one of those top-heavy coat stands that belong to families where there is a row if somebody hangs their things on the wrong hook. And in a rather oppressive library I waited for my interview.

Presently, after a good deal of creaking about on the floor-boards upstairs, the girl's mother came in, looking as though she was going to deal with some very ugly situation with a striking display of competence.

I wondered what she expected me to be like, because when she saw me she seemed so nonplussed she hardly knew what to do next.

"*You* don't run this—this Marriage Bureau?" She spoke as if she were pulling the last two words off a garbage heap.

"Yes."

"Then what about this young man you introduced to my daughter?" she went on, determined to carry out her attack. "Do you know anything about him? Who is he? What is he doing going to a Marriage Bureau? And how did you get hold of my daughter?"

In her rapid torrent of questions I chose to lose the last one because I thought it would be worse for the daughter if I explained that she had approached us and applied to be put on the books.

I told her all I knew about the young man, and she nodded, less angrily.

"Still, the child can't get engaged to somebody she's met through a Marriage Bureau."

I asked why.

"It's unheard of."

I said nothing.

There was a long silence while I stared dreamily at the fire and wondered whether the taxi-driver had gone back to his vegetable garden.

"Anyway, I've stopped it," she said petulantly.

"I understood you originally gave your consent."

"Originally—yes." She made it seem a very long time ago.

"Then you must have liked him."

"I didn't know then about their meeting like this."

"You want her to make a good match?"

"Of course."

"And she told me she never meets anyone here. I understand there's no opportunity for her to meet anyone."

There was no answer, so I went on.

"If you were going to put that right you would have to entertain a good deal and take her about somewhere where she would meet more people. Then, of course, you couldn't stop her falling in love with some particular young man. And you might find afterwards he wasn't a bit suitable in many ways, and there would be a lot of unhappiness all round."

"Yes, well that isn't helping us out of this difficulty," she replied more calmly.

"Except that in this case all the practical details weren't just left to chance. They were known before she met the young man and fell in love with him."

Suddenly, before she realized what she was doing, the mother smiled. And then she laughed.

"Well, tell me more about this Marriage Bureau of yours," she said. "It's all very new and puzzling to people like us."

I stayed for lunch and tea, and only the taxi-driver in the vegetable garden made me firm about not staying for dinner. Altogether I spent a lovely day with them. In the end the scandalous meeting of the young couple had been forgotten.

It was the father, a dear old man in a fly-away collar, who drove me to the station. He was talking and chuckling amiably all the way, and I think he was enjoying a glorious reaction after the family storm which somehow, having been the cause of it, I had managed to dispel.

Chapter XIV

Honeymoon tours and the one that went wrong—On being turned down

HONEYMOONS IN WAR-TIME HAVE CEASED TO MEAN THE MOST extravagant holiday you ever spent in your life. The couples who are setting up a home stay and enjoy it—just in case it may not be there for them to enjoy next leave. And the others merely remain near where they were married, because travelling is not romantic in a smoky carriage with all the air and moonlight sealed out till daybreak.

We had a couple who thought they would spend a complete escapist honeymoon in a caravan. So they set off with all their saved-up petrol coupons, assuring each other they could cook. Actually neither of them could cook at all, and the petrol ran out when they were near some very noisy defences, so it was not altogether a success.

But before the war, when clients were spending real peace-time honeymoons, the Marriage Bureau often used to arrange their honeymoon tours for them.

We whisked them off for anything from a month at St. Moritz to a day at the Zoo, according to their means.

Sometimes Heather, who was honeymoon organizer, had to suggest somewhere when they did not know where to go, but usually they had their own ideas.

She tried to persuade a young riveter who married a parlour-maid not to go abroad, but they were quite determined to go to the South of France. Neither of them could speak a word of French, and they spent the last part of their courting days struggling with gramophone records and a dictionary. After that they discovered the French under-

stood them better when they spoke English. When they came back the young wife told Heather that although she would not hurt her husband's feelings she did not like France because there were not enough English people about. Next year, if they had a holiday, it was going to be Margate or Southend.

After she sent a Cockney couple touring in Scotland we had a shower of snapshots of them wearing the kilt and every other Scottish accessory, inscribed with 'from your two wee Scots pals.'

Unluckily she suggested an elderly doctor and his wife should go to Bali just when the European situation led to their being turned back at Port Said. And a couple who were keen on climbing she sent to Llandudno to climb the Great Orme and Little Orme to their hearts' content, but they got lost after achieving the highest peak and spent the rest of the night cursing both Heather and the Welsh mountains.

The only honeymoon that went wrong through any fault of ours was when we sent a couple to a tiny sailing village in Cornwall and despatched their luggage somewhere else. They arrived, poor souls, in their brand new going-away clothes, from which stray grains of confetti still dropped embarrassingly out of odd corners, in a place where everybody was wearing slacks and very old jerseys. They had to stay in those clothes for days, plodding frequently to the station to see if the luggage had turned up. Of course we traced it as quickly as we could, but it must have been a bad beginning to their honeymoon.

Nowadays with the stream of Bond Street shoppers diminished to a trickle, we often notice people hovering round our sign-board pretending to be staring at the shop-window next door. We have no idea how many toy with the idea of walking in and then lose their nerve and go away again, but we often recognize clients who come to the office as somebody we saw walking up and down outside when we went out to lunch.

Whether it is a compliment to us or just reaction after having taken the plunge and come in nobody knows, but the way they pour out their life story when they arrive, after so much hesitation outside, is rather surprising.

Having appeared once they are usually no longer shy about coming again. But we did have a woman client who did not like coming to the office in case her friends saw her. She used to call for her introductions (we were never allowed to post them) and instead of calling at the office she stood in a doorway opposite and made our secretary run across the road and give them to her when no one was looking.

Not long ago we were trying to form a record of reasons why people sometimes fail to attract the opposite sex, as we thought it would be helpful when we were guiding courtships.

We chose out a number of clients at random, and sent them each the names of four people they had met, asking them to say why they turned them down. So in case these might be useful reading for anybody who wants to get married, the following are some of the replies :

*A retired stock-broker of fifty-nine, with £700
a year, met :*

Miss — (an independent spinster of forty-two). 'She has a charming personality, but does not seem particularly fond of settling down to a quiet home life and that is what I want.'

Mrs. — (a widow of fifty-seven with £3,000 a year). 'The story of her past life depressed me. Her pessimistic outlook and her contempt for the middle class disgusted me. She completely forgot she once owned a pawnshop, but did not let me forget for one second that she has £3,000 per annum. Above all, her snobbery infuriated me.'

Mrs. — (an attractive widow of forty-five with £1,500 a year). 'She appeared to me most suitable as a wife.'

Eventually, having met her a few times, I spoke to her about marriage, but she told me that she did not think me a suitable partner.'

Mrs. — (an attractive widow of forty-five with about £1,000 a year). 'Her conversation re clothes and amusements, etc., displeased me, so did her gushing manner, and her siren-like voice grated on my nerves.'

A spinster in the thirties, with a four-figure income, met:

Major —. 'Nice, but had no sense of humour. Too short, and too army.'

Mr. — (a retired manufacturer). 'Too old. Bad breath.'

Mr. — (a film magnate). 'Common. Not used to my class of friends. Was shy with them. Wore ready-made clothes.'

Major — (retired). 'Very nice. Old and staid for his age. Too many relations. Too fond of country life, and he lived too far away from London.'

An architect of forty-nine, with £650 a year, met:

Miss — (who owns a fruit shop in Manchester). 'Too peroxidised.'

Miss — (a small, dark secretary of twenty-seven). 'Too gushing.'

Miss — (a schoolmistress of thirty). 'Too schoolmarmy.'

Miss — (in a Government office). 'O.K., but she didn't like me much.'

A spinster of twenty-nine, with £300 a year, met:

Mr. — (a manufacturer earning about £1,000 a year, aged thirty-six). 'We spent a pleasant afternoon and I enjoyed his company immensely. We appeared to have many interests in common, and I regret that I have not heard from him since.'

Mr. — (optician, in the early forties, with about £800 a year). 'His very high opinion of himself was shown in all his letters, and the very fact that he addressed me by my Christian name in his second letter told me he lacked breeding.'

Major — (a cavalry officer in the forties). 'He took me out for tea, and his shyness made me feel most uncomfortable and embarrassed, although his manner was most charming.'

Mr. — (a film director with about £3,000 a year). 'His loud check overcoat dazzled my eyes. His bowler hat (at least two sizes too small) and purple socks, would not lend themselves to my quiet taste in wardrobe.'

A young parlour-maid met:

Mr. — (a caretaker at a girls' school). 'Quite nice, but his children got in the way. Marrying him would include a ready-made family.'

Mr. — (a tanner). 'He was quite nice and we shall remain good friends. But I couldn't contemplate marriage with somebody who doesn't like country life.'

Mr. — (an optician). 'Definitely a football fiend. He told me he was the goal-keeper of the local team.'

Mr. — (a railway clerk who came all the way from the Orkneys to see her). 'He was inclined to be mean and rather too fond of neat whisky.'

An Army major of forty-two, with £1,500 a year, met:

Miss — (twenty-eight). 'Insufficient brain. No taste in dress.'

Mrs. — (a vivacious young widow). 'Oldish. Talks too much.'

Miss — (an independent spinster of thirty-two and very attractive). 'Didn't like me. Attractive woman.'

Miss — (somebody we didn't see and who said her age was twenty-six, but when this man met her she was over

forty and had to be helped out of the taxi on two sticks).
 'Said she was much younger than she was. Very blue stocking.'

A welfare worker of about thirty met:

A schoolmaster. 'Too domineering.'

A commercial traveller of thirty-five. 'His one idea of life is dancing and cards. He wouldn't be able to settle down to everyday life.'

A secretary of forty-two. 'His political outlook was reverse to mine. He couldn't understand my outlook any more than I could understand his.'

A soldier of thirty-seven. 'Too affectionate. He embarrassed me in public.'

*A young divorced woman of twenty-seven,
 who lived on a houseboat, met:*

A Major. 'He proposed, but I turned him down as he expected me to keep him after he retired.'

A food king of forty, a widower with two children. 'He was very attractive, but on second thoughts he didn't want to marry me as I have a daughter of two.'

A solicitor of thirty-three. 'I would no more marry him than fly to the moon. I disliked him the moment we met. He has no manners and his looks and lack of charm put me off.'

*A widower of fifty-one, with £750 per annum,
 met:*

A spinster from Brighton (rather buxom and a very nice type). 'She is too serious for me. A good type of woman but not my type.'

A twenty-five-year-old games mistress. 'I like her very much but she is too tied up with her family.'

A spinster in the thirties. 'I like her very much too, but she didn't like me.'

A spinster who sold arts and crafts. 'She is too well dressed. It makes her seem hard.'

Sometimes clients write long letters to each other, saying how they failed to please. And in this connection one woman gave us a copy of a letter she sent to a young man explaining why she did not want to meet him a second time. As we thought it rather an illuminating letter, I should like to quote some extracts from it:

' . . . Your ideals about marriage are almost perfect, and I confess that the thought of being loved as I believe you *could* care is very attractive, also I thought it was fine the way you said you would meet me *all* the way about going to church. That is why I am sorry so much potentially fine material is being wasted as you are wasting it.

' Keep your ideals by all means, because one day they will glorify someone's life, but at the same time I think you are looking at the question from the wrong angle. Instead of saying to yourself: "I should be a different man if I had someone to care for *me*," make it "I will *be* a different man before I ask any woman to share my life."

' We both agreed we wanted only the best, didn't we? Are you offering your best? Have you the right to place such a burden on a woman's shoulders from the outset, because burden it would be, I assure you, if she had to become engaged to a man before he got an incentive to live. Personally, I want a *man* for a husband, not a grown-up child, who is always crying for the moon without trying to get it. . . .

' I have hit hard, I know, but I am doing it because I believe there is a man underneath that layer of self-pity—a man I, or someone else, could be proud of. I should imagine you have a very fine mother, but I think she has been *too* fond of you in letting you foster that habit

of pitying yourself so much. I realize this means a lot to you and you would probably be a different man if you had hope, but life has some hard knocks for all of us, and it is the way we face up to them which makes character.

‘I do not know the full circumstances, of course; therefore perhaps I have no right to judge, but have you really done all you could to get friends, or get a job with an income which will enable you to keep a wife? I repeat, have you a right to expect *any* woman to become engaged to you, just to give you an incentive, when you have no idea when you are likely to give her a decent home? You will say here, I know, that your lack of a job has prejudiced me: this is not entirely so, but it has in the sense of the effect it has apparently had on your character.

‘There is another thing, too, I *must* mention, and that is your personal appearance. I have formed the opinion that if you altered this, your whole life would change. Look at yourself in the mirror and try to see yourself with a woman’s eyes. You were kind enough to say you liked my green outfit; I put this on because I desired to pay respect to you, even though we had never met, but had *you* done anything to make yourself attractive in a woman’s eyes?

‘I feel like a cad writing like this, but you need a stimulant now—not milk-and-water pity. Why not try the effect of buying a few smart ties and collars to match your shirts and suits (I should always insist on my husband looking his best when taking me places!), turn down the collar of your coat, wear a neat muffler and gloves if you are cold, square your shoulders and walk as if you are going to conquer the world—not let the world conquer you, and I am sure the effect will be electric.

‘. . . For the moment I do not feel I want to meet you again, but if, say in three months’ time, you are

still unfixed, you like to write and say . . . "if only I had someone for whom *I* could care and protect . . . I have a job and in a few months' time could offer a home," then, if I also am still unfixed, I should count it a privilege to meet you. Until then, however, I feel we must both be free.'

Chapter XV

Some married couples

“ YES, BUT WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THEY ARE MARRIED ? ”

“ Do you ever get anyone coming back and saying what a frightful wife you’ve given them ? ” “ How do they get on afterwards ? ”

Heather and I are for ever answering these questions from outside people. We wonder why anybody should think that, just because a couple met in a rather practical fashion, their marriage is bound to pursue an erratic and spectacular course quite different from any other marriage. That it should be perfectly normal and harmonious seems beyond their belief. And that in the whole two years of our career we have not, so far, had a complaint from one of our nine hundred and thirty-two married couples seems to them equally incredible.

We like to keep in touch with clients after they are married and find out whether our judgment was good in our selection of temperaments. And, like anybody who has taken much painstaking care over a piece of work, we naturally want to see the result. So whenever a couple are nice enough to ask us to go and see them afterwards we always accept if we can.

Henry and Dorothy had been married five months. They lived, as planned, in a small modern house in the suburbs, with a brightly painted front door. There was a bell, a knocker, a very correct letter box and an elaborate affair for scraping mud off your shoes. The step was a line of yellow that compelled one to stride over it without leaving

a footmark—a stride which took you to another door-mat inside like an oasis in the shining linoleum of the hall. It was a very newly-married house, and clearly belonged to somebody in the first flush of house pride.

Dorothy took me up to the spare-room, explaining that I was their first visitor and the black-out was not fixed properly yet.

I trod warily up the staircase, which had a narrow carpet oddly roped off from the varnished cream paint on the stairs by pieces of string. "Don't you think it's a good idea of mine to keep people from walking on the paint?" she said. I struggled with a sudden inclination to stray off the carpet, which I felt was entirely induced by the presence of the string.

She showed me all over the house, and I followed her round feeling gratified at her delight in it. I felt as if, having given someone a present, I was watching them unwrap the parcel. At frequent intervals she referred with equal pride to "my servant," not, one gathered, that the servant had any particular merits. On the contrary she was prone to leaving most things undone, but she was part of this glorious new thing, "a home of my own."

Henry got back from the office about half-past six. "You remember he's in shipping," said Dorothy rather grandly, in the way people usually refer to one of the directors, and I remembered he had an administrative job in a small steamship company.

He lived with his parents in the same neighbourhood till he was thirty-seven, was earning £800 a year, and had covered himself with glory by running the local tennis tournaments and dances for Spitfire funds. Then he calculated he could marry and set up a home and add to his local laurels by importing a good-looking wife from Town. But he only knew the girls in the vicinity, so he sought one out through us.

Dorothy was just what he wanted. She was nice-looking and strikingly neat, with the stamp of perfect housewife

about her strong, capable, unvarnished hands. She wanted just the kind of little home he wanted.

When Henry arrived he unlocked a cupboard full of all kinds of bottled, ready-made cocktails and waved his hand towards them for me to take my choice. At dinner they very touchingly brought out their champagne, while 'my servant,' decked in starched muslin frills, handed round a very good dinner.

Twice there were telephone calls for him in the middle of the meal and he went off straightening the collar of his blue shirt, saying: "Pardon me, will you, I expect it's my boss ringing from Liverpool."

"I do wish we'd never had the telephone put in," said Dorothy, when he was out of the room, her eyes shining with pride at the luxury of having it beside her bed. Then she leaned across the table with a shy look towards the door first, and whispered something in my ear. I am afraid my first reaction was to hope she would not be like the Colonel's wife and have twins.

It was encouraging to see how much they were enjoying themselves, and how thoroughly devoted they were and pleased with their lot. As we sat at the dinner-table I could not help comparing them with the same two people who first came to the office.

He, perhaps, had only changed one comfortable suburban life for another. But apart from the pride of possession he obviously felt in his wife and home, he must, I thought, be glad not to be living with his parents and having to read the newspaper after father and leave him the best arm-chair.

It was Dorothy I thought of most. I remembered her as a receptionist in one of those dreary London houses that call themselves flatlets, and which are really a warren of ill-adapted single rooms with a wash-basin, a divan bed and a Yale lock. They are usually occupied by impecunious young bachelors, thrifty stenographers, retired Army men, and spinsters with library subscriptions.

Dorothy's flatlet house sought to achieve a hotel atmosphere by having her sitting behind a large desk with a bowl of flowers on it in the hall, and an array of key-hooks for the occupants to hang their door-keys on when they went out. She had to be there until 10.30 at night, in the swirl of draughts from several long, bare passages and the front door, answering the telephone and listening to complaints from the tenants about other people banging doors.

Except for one night off a week and several hours each day, she had little time to meet people, and after trying a few times without success to get another job she had given it up. She came to us on a sudden impulse after getting frightened that she would be there for the rest of her days.

Now she asked nothing more from life than what she had, for it was exactly what she told us she wanted when she came into the office to put her name on the books. The type of husband and the kind of home he gave her were almost exactly as she had described to us that day.

We find our married couples never tell their friends they met through the Marriage Bureau. These two had not told a living soul, and I was amused to see it was almost as though they had even convinced themselves that they met at a party instead of through us. Evidently they did not give our office a thought any longer, and if I spoke about it they behaved as though it was something they only remembered very dimly and which had really no connection with them. They preferred to think they met at a party and were as near as possible to believing it.

One could not discuss marriage with them from any approach, because they belonged to a class who look on marriage as something it is not respectable to discuss. They regarded it as an institution which turns out exactly as they expect it to turn out, and as something which is certainly not fashioned by themselves.

That night, as I undressed on a senna-coloured carpet patterned like a geometry lesson, I found myself thinking that perhaps the average suburban middle-class attitude to

marriage makes the soundest union of all. Call it faith, for that is what it really is, and unquestioning belief on both sides that it will run to pattern. I think I would back one of those marriages before all the rest.

Cuthbert and Jane had stopped the clock. Any day now Cuthbert would be called up, but until it happened they were living an idyllic existence in one of the most attractive country houses I have ever seen. The fact that they were living on borrowed time did not worry them because they were too happy to think about anything else.

At thirty-nine, with three thousand a year of his own, and complete leisure, Cuthbert was quite unspoilt. He was tall, with an aristocratic, outdoor face, an athletic figure and an obviously genial disposition. And at twenty-four Jane had been chosen by him out of fifteen well-born country girls to share this delightful house which had been his before they married. She met five other men before she got engaged to Cuthbert. She was pretty, with dark, curly hair, rather heavy legs, a lovely skin and a sweet expression.

At first they were both a little embarrassed at meeting me again, perhaps because although they each saw me a good deal before they got engaged this was the first time they had seen me when they were together. They kept looking shyly at me and then at each other. There were long silences, when I would keep asking for another cigarette or a drink which I did not want. With typical perversity of circumstance all I could think of to talk about was the Marriage Bureau, and obviously that would be calculated to make the next silence last for ever. So till they recovered themselves I wandered round the room admiring it.

We were in a big, low-ceilinged lounge with cream-washed walls, navy blue and white patterned chintzes on the deep arm-chairs and a white rug in front of the open brick fireplace. There were shelves in the brickwork round the fireplace, adorned with gaily coloured old china pot lids, and

the few pieces of furniture were lovely antiques, perfectly chosen.

When we went over the rest of the house we all forgot our shyness (which, of course, I had caught as well). It had the most inconsequential architecture, full of odd alcoves and quaint blind alleys in the passages, and in each of these unconventional spaces there was something nice to look at. An old corner cupboard, stripped of its varnish and holding china, with concealed lighting underneath the carving at the top, a little bureau, or just a table of flowers with an invisible beam shining on their petals.

There were lovely Grinling Gibbons overmantels on some of the fireplaces, and prettily dressed window-seats in all the rooms, while their bedroom was pale green with a rich plum-coloured carpet and hangings, and limed oak woodwork.

They were rather sweet together when they were taking me round. "Not so bad? Humph?" Cuthbert would say with a modest attempt at concealing his pleasure when I admired anything very much. And Jane would murmur quietly: "I like it." So that he gave her a devoted little glance because she was pleased with his choice.

Later we had dinner in a plain panelled dining-room at a long refectory table, with the candlelight shining on old silver, and distant gunfire jingling the spoons and forks on the crooked oak surface.

It was an ordinary, comfortable, English home, and no less vulnerable to enemy action than any other. Yet I felt as if I was in a real bastion of peace. This had nothing to do with it being in the country. I should still have felt an illusion of complete sanctuary were it in the heart of London or Manchester. It was just the atmosphere of the house, and the happy couple inside it, that were enough to dispel any grave thoughts which might have come into one's mind with the gunfire.

This time I could not do much in the way of comparison with the same couple before marriage, except perhaps in the

case of Jane. She had been living in the country with her parents, who made her help in the house and play the devoted daughter to a very binding degree. There was not too much money, and her only changes consisted of visits to former school-friends who all seemed to live as remotely in the country as she did. She scarcely met anybody, and that was why she came to the Marriage Bureau.

Her mother knew she had joined, but they told all their friends and relations, including Cuthbert's parents, that they met 'through friends.' All curiosity about 'Where did you meet?' they parried with extreme vagueness, because they always meant to arrange a stock story, but forgot to settle on one before the interest in their romance died down. They told me this just after Jane said some people were coming for cocktails on Sunday evening.

"You won't mention the Marriage Bureau, will you?" she said apprehensively, "because nobody knows except my mother."

I assured her I would do nothing so tactless.

Conversation revolved round golf, bridge and gardening, and the friends who played golf and bridge with them. They took me round the garden next morning and followed the war-time fashion of showing their vegetable garden. It was all tended by a couple of gardeners, except for two little rival patches, side by side, which they each gardened themselves like children.

"Look, now they *are* coming up. By May you'll be put hopelessly in the shade, darling."

"Did you keep the packet or can you remember the name?" he asked mockingly.

"Don't be inquisitive. Anyway, I didn't have to write it on a wooden stick and leave it in the flower-bed."

"You would if you'd thought of it in time."

Jane laughed good-naturedly and did not deny that whatever came up in her garden would be news to her.

While they were talking I remembered about Cuthbert being called up, and realized they had blissfully forgotten

that he would not be there to see the two little rival gardens in bloom.

Love is probably the only thing that stops the clock in war-time.

“My dear, I can’t even boil an egg.”

The voice that made this exaggerated statement was rich and low. It came from somewhere inside an opulent high-backed arm-chair, from whence the owner was too lethargic to tilt herself forward and look at me.

From the side I had a view of tapering dark-red fingernails holding a cocktail glass, and a length of very shapely leg. They belonged to a good-looking girl of twenty-eight who was now a Marriage Bureau bride.

She used to live by herself on a not very imposing dress allowance, in a flat where I felt she must have boiled many eggs in between going to night clubs. Her own particular circle of friends, who were mostly smart night-lifers, evidently thought she was too much of a good-time girl to want to get married. Probably she pretended she was against the idea, for she had a very cynical line of conversation, but, whatever the reason, she asked us to find her a husband.

He was somewhere at the other end of the room, mixing cocktails. Forty, and good-looking, rich and in the Army, with not too many brains and an amiable disposition. I felt he was the kind of man who would refer to his wife as “a very fine filly.”

They did not mind talking about the Marriage Bureau, and they talked about themselves rather as though they had each picked up a bargain at the bloodstock sales.

She was certainly very good-looking, with a taste for clothes, and he had adorned her with all kinds of lovely jewellery from rings to regimental badges. But she was one of those young women who cannot talk about a bed or a dog without making other women blush. In fact, her

conversation was well sprinkled with *risqué* remarks, which I personally found a trifle embarrassing.

They had hired an expensive-looking furnished house in the West country, near where he was stationed, where they kept a batman and two young maids who giggled at the batman. Amongst other things the husband had given his languid lady a sun-ray lamp, with which she occupied her mornings, basking naked beneath it on a large white sheepskin rug in her bedroom.

"Can't get any brandy—it's such a stinking price," cooed the voice from the chair.

"Disgusting sum; thirty-five bob a bottle. Matter of fact, a feller round here said he'd sell me some cheap, then went and sold it to a wine shop at a profit. Rotten shame I call it," said her husband, holding the shaker up to the light to view his result.

"Crashing bores, all the people round here," remarked his wife. "They simply don't speak our language."

"Do you see much of them?" I asked politely.

"Nothing at all, my dear. We vegetate. It's paralysing without brandy."

"That's not a bad little bit of something good to eat who lives at the Monastery," said her husband, coming over to the fire.

"Oh, darling, you don't know. You've only seen her in electric light. It's terrible in broad daylight."

He was always told he did not know, a treatment which he weathered good-humouredly every time. I began to wonder if he liked being patronized, and that she had divined it as being the right way to treat him.

I left after half an hour's visit feeling they were well matched. At least they spoke the same language.

Somewhere in a maze of streets behind Chiswick I found a row of little semi-detached red houses. I counted my way along to No. 12, where I rang the bell and waited. The front door looked as though it had never been opened, and

the windows, which were all shut, had heavy lace curtains that hid any sign of life there might have been inside.

No one answered the ring and I began to wonder if anybody was at home, except that as I came along the row I noticed all the windows were shut and the people could not all be out the whole way along the street. Next door a small boy of less than four in long trousers, with a comforter in his mouth and a face rather like old wax, stood squarely by the fence and stared at me as though I were some strange animal that had woken him up in the middle of the night. Beneath the stare I almost imagined I was doing something quite outlandish and peculiar in calling there, and as the minutes dragged on I began to feel a complete fool.

Then, having waited long enough, I lifted the large brass knocker and gave it a resounding rap that echoed down the street.

"Oh, there you are, Miss. Isn't that lovely of you to come along."

I looked round and saw Emily, who had emerged, wreathed in smiles, from somewhere round the side of the house.

"Do you mind coming round this way, if you'll excuse it. We never use the front door and I think Dad must have the key in his pocket."

I followed her round the corner along a narrow cinder path, thankful to take cover from the stare, and she led me into a bright kitchen ornamented with calendar backs of half the views in England.

"Come and have a little chat in the front room," she invited.

We continued into the room behind the lace curtains, which was filled with photographs and china ornaments that covered every bit of space on the walls and furniture. The piano, I felt, shared the fate of the front door and was never opened; otherwise such a clattering cascade of the generations would surely have tumbled to the floor and smashed their frames.

"I did want to hear how you were getting on, as I haven't seen you since your wedding," I said.

"Oh, yes, ever so well, thank you, Miss. And the wedding all went off all right. My sister at Clapham lent her house and we had a lovely cake and Dad made a speech."

Emily's eyes shone happily in her honest round face, as she sat with her hands folded in a billowing lap and described her marriage. I could see 'Dad' making his speech, the large flat wedding cake, the glasses of port and sandwiches, and the fifteen guests. And I could see Emily in her black chiffon frock with her bouquet (I dissuaded her from a bridal preference for pale blue) blushing and smiling at the toast.

"Who'd have thought it!" she finished.

What she meant was, who would have thought she would be a bride for the first time at forty-three, when she thought she had been passed by for life.

But Emily had the comeliness of kindness, and even if she could have parted with two or three stone without loss, she made a delightful companion and a capable wife.

'Dad' was a quiet, pleasant-faced railway man of fifty-four, a widower with a grown-up family, and he soon took Emily off our hands to revive his home for him. Apparently the sister at Clapham approved him first before she accepted, and they talked openly about the Marriage Bureau; all their friends and relations knew how they had met.

"Dad's ever so nice, but what I like best is having a little home of my own and not be looking after someone else's," she said, for before she was married Emily worked as a cook-general in Hampstead.

"And the neighbours are ever so friendly," she continued, while I was surprised that the sealed windows and inscrutably drawn curtains should harbour any sociable people.

"We see them for a chat now and again, and every Saturday evening we go to the cinema, and Dad has his Rotary Club and fire-watching two nights a week. My sister

at Clapham thinks I've done very well, because being a railway man he gets a pension when he stops work, and we'll still be very comfortable. Her husband hasn't got a Government job, so there won't be a pension and it's hard to put by in war-time with prices so high. I think she's really quite envious of me. And you know, Miss, Dad and I are really very grateful to you for introducing us."

"I'm so glad, and I should think you make him a very good wife," I remarked with sincerity.

Emily smiled as she got up to go and put the kettle on for tea.

"Well, I try and keep him comfortable," she said modestly. "Men don't want any extra troubles these days."

And while I helped her get tea ready I decided we could feel that 'Dad' and Emily were also a very good match.

A tall, grey stone house right on the high street of a mining village in South Wales. When you opened the front door the smell you would associate with its brass plate wafted towards you. A faint smell of ether, mingled with antiseptic, clung about the hall, and suggested that the miners' doctor had his surgery in the house.

What might have been a comfortable lounge was the waiting-room, where the panel patients filed in and sat on benches, jabbering in sing-song Welsh voices, while they waited for their consultation. Heavy boots tramped along the passage during those crowded hours when the surgery was open. And when it was not, there was always a ringing telephone or an urgent door-bell. Then the front door banging and the car starting, and meals waiting in the oven, congealing and being abandoned.

"I wish I'd married anyone but a doctor," said Mildred, having given me this picture of her bridal home.

We were having lunch in London when she was up for a week's shopping not long after she was married.

"But you knew what a doctor's life was like," I replied gently, trying to conceal any reproach.

"Yes, but I never thought it would all be so much on top of me. Never having a moment's peace. I couldn't believe people could be so fond of going to the doctor as they are in that place. It's like the cinema, the way they come flocking in."

She was seriously discontented about it and I felt very concerned, while I hoped she was not being unkind to the silent, overworked little doctor whose career was getting on her nerves.

Had she been a younger woman she might have idolized his work as well as him, or even if she had a motherly disposition she might have rejoiced in taking care of him while he was so over-burdened. But she was forty-five, and she was not motherly but domineering. She had approached marriage rather as if she were going on a cruise, which she was prepared to criticize if it did not come up to her expectations.

It was not so much her age (though that was fairly disadvantageous) that made her a problem client when she was on the books, but her domineering character. Although she was good-looking and quite smart and had £1,000 a year, she had dozens of introductions without any success. I think she treated the men rather as if she were shopping in a bargain basement, where the goods must be studied critically in case of flaws.

When the doctor came along his wife had been dead a few months, and he said he wanted somebody who would take charge of him, so she seemed to be just what he wanted. He was obviously a very mild, easy person to live with, and we would have been afraid of putting two domineering people together in the same house, so he seemed to be the solution for her, too.

"How do you like your step-daughter?" I asked, to stop her dwelling on the smell of ether.

"She's away at her job in the day-time, but it's like a

herd of elephants in the house when she comes home and brings her friends. It's high time she grew up, and I think the best thing would be for her to get another job in London, and have a small flat of her own in Town. But Harry thinks she's too young and wants to keep her at home."

"She's only eighteen, isn't she?" I said, remembering that she was the pride of the little doctor's heart.

"Yes, but it's still time she grew up."

I seemed to have struck a fresh flaw in the bargain, and I began to feel very apprehensive as to how this match was turning out. Meanwhile I changed the subject again and she was soon engrossed in telling me about the things she had bought. Among them, I was surprised to find, were many attractive things for the deplorable antiseptic house. She was even impatient to install them and see what the doctor thought of them.

"Gracious! I'll have to fly for my train," she said, suddenly catching sight of the clock in the restaurant. "But I'll be up again next week. Harry's coming up for a meeting at the Medical Society to do with his special miners' sanatorium. You know, he's really doing wonderful work down there, and he says it's been such a help since he married me because I've taken all his other worries off his hands, and he can attack his work so much better."

As we parted on the pavement outside, and the smart capable figure vanished into the crowd, I was feeling quite happy again. I had remembered similar grumbling bouts before she was married, and realized they were not the outpourings of an unhappy person, but merely her particular form of amusement (and not an uncommon one either).

An afternoon's grumbling, to some people, is as refreshing as a game of golf. I was only glad that I, and not the doctor, had partnered her in this particular round.

Chapter XVI

*Second birthday party—The wallflower comes back—News
of some of the others—Ending*

ON APRIL 17, 1941, WITH THE DUST STILL UNSETTLED FROM the ruins of the worst raid on London the night before, the Marriage Bureau had its second birthday.

A few yards away there was a gaping tear in a familiar side-street, where now the work and hopes of several more people were reduced to a mountain of rubble sprawling across the road. Further down Bond Street were other gaps from earlier raids, since tidied up and waiting for peace and a new building. There were many more windows without glass, and buildings that stood up with their contents churned into demoniacal chaos.

It was the kind of day when a sleepless night and the fate of others were enough to make one feel a futility about troubling with something that might fall in the next hour of destruction. But our office walls were lined with greeting telegrams from happy couples, and the people who picked their way across the broken glass were mostly men and women who had found in each other something precious that shut out all the ugliness and fear of war.

At no time in the history of any generation could they have needed love and companionship more than now, and we had helped these once lonely people find it, and thus equipped them with the best armour against all the terror raids that might happen.

And so, even if the Marriage Bureau offices were razed to the ground in the next 'blitz,' our work would not be just

a memory with a monument of rubble. There would be living, breathing testimonies to it all over the world in those nine hundred and thirty-two married couples and the approximate two hundred and fifty-odd people who at that time were just engaged.

Of course it was worth while, I reflected, much more so than it ever was in peace-time, and as I looked at the faces round us and remembered the lives we had re-fashioned, I drew fresh encouragement to carry on. Heather must have been thinking exactly the same thing.

Now, just after our second anniversary, with the war increasing in intensity, we are as busy as ever, and seeing an average of thirty-three new applicants every day, apart from the more timorous hundreds who write in. Except for a famous naval and military tailors (who have anyway been bombed and had to move their premises) we can probably claim to be one of the few really thriving concerns in Bond Street that war-time conditions have not affected adversely.

We still have our problems. Many of the original ones are with us yet. Hope springs eternal in Mr. Dewlap, the Bureau wallflower, who has lately put in sanitation in his garage to add to his charms. Fanny, our loveable, middle-aged butterfly, has almost found a resting-place with a retired business man who lives in a coastal resort. She has asked us not to send her any more introductions as they are getting on very well, and he has written glowingly about her to us. But her destiny is still not quite settled, and he has hinted delicately that Fanny is rather fat. Meanwhile, as they are both so pleased with each other, we are goading her into a more drastic slimming programme, which is already bearing fruit, though she still clings fondly to the lumps of amber on the long black ribbons.

The mother with the child in the similar clothes rates herself high, and frightens everyone away with descriptions of her first husband's private aeroplane and the landing-

ground in the garden. She has frightened several £5000-a-year men away, and we are trying to impress on her that her particular line of build-up is unseasonable in war-time.

At last the industrial widower with his seven children and plush settees has recently persuaded a gay young widow to become his bride. Shortly after the wedding the gloomy mansion was burned to the ground, antimacassars and all. Luckily no one was hurt.

The elderly peeress who asked me to say I was a V.A.D. with her in the last war has formed a new home in the South with a retired Army man. And our church mouse has, I am proud to say, made a very good marriage with the agent of a big shooting estate in Scotland, who was enchanted with her. 'She is charming, and just the person I have been looking for for I dare not say how long,' he wrote. We hear they are very happy, and incidentally he was the recipient of the startling snapshots that fell out on my desk when she was writing to him before they met.

In spite of the fact that so many of the clients either over-rate themselves, or demand perfection—which doesn't exist—in others, or are in other respects problems, approximately one-third get engaged within three months of receiving an introduction from us, and only about 5 per cent have failed to find a mate at all.

One client, an American engineer, wrote a very nice description of our work in one of his letters :

'In constructional engineering every thought goes into the smallest detail to ensure stability and unity. Yet in the majority of cases so little attention to detail is given to the finest machines in the Universe—Man and Woman—to enable them to achieve unity and give the best results. That, Miss Oliver and Miss Jenner, is why your Marriage Bureau caught my attention. You, in a sense of the word, are engineers. You want to get together the

right material, see that the "specifications" coincide; then you are reasonably sure that your "constructions" can weather severe conditions and tests.'

The severe conditions and tests are certainly there just now, so we hope we are good engineers.



